

**YOKOZAWA TAKAFUMI NO BAAI,
VOL. 5**



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Chapter 9

The afternoon cafe-bar of the hotel he stepped into for his meet-up was bathed in a relaxed atmosphere, and given that all of the sofa seats along the windowed wall were taken up already, Yokozawa Takafumi instead opted for a seat at the counter.

Glancing down at his watch, he realized he still had a good half hour before he was supposed to be here. His business today had included weekend overtime as well as picking up Kirishima and Hiyori, who were presently attending the wedding of a relative. In exchange for borrowing Kirishima's car to drive to the office, he'd been tasked with picking up the Kirishimas at the hotel where the wedding had been held.

"May I take your order?"

"I'll have a coffee."

"Right away, sir."

After delivering his order, he pulled out his planner. The reason he'd had to go into the office on a day off was because the preparations for the upcoming winter fair event were closing in.

He was presently stationed in the sales department of Marukawa Shoten, and given that he'd ruthlessly worked his ass off to advance through the ranks since the moment he'd joined the company, he'd well earned the nickname of "The Wild Bear" around the office.

While he'd largely marched to the beat of his own drum, adopting a work ethic of charging forward on his own, in recent years, he'd started to be entrusted with projects that he had to take personal responsibility for—and perhaps that was why he had been installed as the coordinator for the different divisions of the company for this winter fair event.

Thanks to that promotion, he was spending his days of late so busy that he felt like his head was spinning. While the winter fair was hardly a new event—seeing as it was held every year—this year's version was a bit different from previous ones.

Normally, every division was in charge of organizing their own part of the event on their own, but orders from the higher-ups had dictated that those barriers be taken down, so this year Marukawa Shoten was going all out in a grand festival. Despite the fact that all of the different genres involved different media and content, they were all coming together to put on the same event.

The basic plan, as a starting point for the project, was to help introduce readers to new works from genres they'd never read before. Yokozawa agreed it was a great idea, and he could understand the ultimate goal. If they pulled this off, anyone would be able to appreciate that it was a grand, exciting "festival".

But actually executing this vision would require a bit of thinking outside the box. It wasn't the easiest thing to draw upon the cooperative efforts of so many different authors, so his first item of business was to speak to the different sales sub-departments and then convince the managing editors of those departments to lend a hand. When it came down to it, negotiating with the *people* involved would ultimately prove trickier than the actual *work* part.

Marukawa Shoten was brimming with editors who had rather...*quirky* personalities, so any half-assed proposals he put forth were sure to be turned down on the spot. Just thinking about that possibility left him with a heavy weight in the pit of his stomach.

But thanks to the aid of Kirishima, he'd already managed to secure the cooperation of the shounen manga division—with *Japun* leading the pack. They'd agreed to prepare original illustrations as special prizes for the fair along with autographed books as well. If things kept going this well, they might even be able to put together an autograph session with one of the authors, too. Yokozawa couldn't begin to describe how grateful he was for Kirishima's efforts to this end.

Though, to be fair, he hadn't forced Kirishima into agreeing to a half-assed plan. He'd gone over the proposal time and time again, receiving advice and critique, before perfecting it. In order to increase sales, they naturally needed to increase their readership—and it was the job of the sales department to do their best to get as many people as possible to pick up a book.

A glance at a sales report might seem like nothing more than a bunch of numbers, but once you reminded yourself that those numbers represented *people*, it really tugged at the emotions. The harder the job, the greater the feeling of accomplishment when it was all over, and while the sales department never received any sort of direct contact from readers about how they liked a particular work, simply glancing around the floor of a bookshop or hearing a report from an employee left him feeling happy, reaffirming the feeling that this job was *worth it* in the end.

Close on the heels of the shounen manga division had been the shoujo manga magazine *Emerald*, with most of his requests being agreed to two days prior. Discussions with the BL, light novel, and anime divisions were also ongoing, and Yokozawa foresaw no looming issues, fully expecting to receive their eventual agreement to help out as requested.

The only division left still causing him grief was the literature division. He was working to earn their aid through discussions with the managing salesman, but he had yet to receive a positive response on the matter. Given that the literature division had never really worked with the manga or novel divisions before, they didn't seem all that excited to be taking part in the festival.

With no available precedent to use as a predictor of how successful the fair might be, Yokozawa could kind of understand their hesitation, which was precisely why he was pondering just how best to get them to agree to help out.

"Here you are, sir."

He was pulled from his daydreaming by a cup of coffee being set just off to his side, giving off a lovely fresh-brewed aroma. The cookie included with the saucer was shaped like a four-leaf clover. He added in a generous amount of milk from the provided pitcher—in large part out of consideration for his poor stomach. He'd been under considerably less stress of late compared with before, which had helped settle his stomach's tendency to pain him, but he could sense a looming rush coming up on the horizon.

He'd probably just stopped stressing out as much *period*, though. Whenever he felt a headache coming on, Kirishima was usually there

to talk things over and help him come up with a way to resolve the issue, and if he felt himself getting irritated or frustrated, simply watching Hiyori play with Sorata left him with a pleasant feeling.

These thoughts made him wonder if Hiyori had managed to successfully pull off the rather important task she'd been asked to take care of today: she had been the ring bearer, entrusted with carrying the rings to the new bride and groom. Apparently she'd gotten a new dress just for the ceremony and had been on cloud nine for *days* with excitement.

“...?”

The buzz of chatter around him seemed to grow in intensity, and when he glanced about, he noticed a line of people walking out of a church in the central garden, seeming to have finished their ceremony. The bride, clothed in a pure white dress and escorted by her groom in a handsome tuxedo, wore an expression of utter joy.

He wondered idly if Hiyori would one day leave the nest, as it were, like that. She'd probably make the most beautiful bride, too...but would Yokozawa be there to witness it?

It was difficult trying to picture where he'd be ten years in the future. At the very least, he'd likely still be slaving away at a job, and while he hoped he'd still be working in the sales department, he couldn't predict just what HR might decide to do with him in the future.

Still more murky, though...was his private life—in large part because he was *already* leading a life he never would have *fathomed* possible just one year ago.

Kirishima had been one of those people he might have given a greeting to if they passed in the hall, but nothing more; to now be in a relationship with him, being invited most every weekend to the Kirishimas' home, growing close with his daughter and even having them look after his cat...it was something he never would have imagined he'd be doing, which made it all the stranger.

But knowing such happy normalcy left him with his own share of concerns. How long could this go on? How much longer would he be allowed to live like this? The stronger his feelings of not wanting to lose what he had, the more pressing those worries became.

The brighter the sunlight streaming down upon him...the darker the shadows became.

Lost in his own thoughts, he hadn't noticed a cocktail glass being silently set before him. It was a long-stem flute filled with a blue gradient liquid and fizzing with little bubbles.

"...Umm, I didn't order this...?" He didn't recall ordering such a drink; his coffee mug was nearly empty, but he highly doubted that a *cocktail* constituted a refill at this cafe.

He supposed that the server had just mistakenly given him another customer's order, but the bartender simply returned his confused expression with an easy smile, extending a hand toward the sofa seats along the window.

"It's from that customer."

"Huh...?" Convinced something that sounded like it was right out of a television show would never happen to someone like him, he twisted around to glance the way the bartender had pointed—and there seated alongside the windowed wall were Kirishima and Hiyori, waving at him.



“What the..?” It seemed the cocktail had been nothing more than the pair’s prank. Despite having had his attention focused on the lobby, he hadn’t noticed them enter at all. He flagged down a passing waiter and asked him to carry the glass over, then slipped his planner back into

his bag and headed toward the Kirishimas. "What the heck was that? If you were here, you should've just *said* so!"

"I've always wanted to give it a try. Surprised you, huh?" His expression was like that of a child thrilled to have pulled off a joke. This was Kirishima Zen, editor-in-chief of *Monthly Japan*, single father, and Yokozawa's lover.

Leading hit-maker for their company and beloved by his subordinates, he was a doting father in his private life, and despite losing his wife to illness, he'd managed to raise his daughter remarkably well.

Naturally, though, their relationship was a secret from not only Hiyori but their friends and coworkers as well. They'd been dating about six months by now, and at times it seemed like ages had passed, while at other times it felt like those six months had passed in a flash.

Kirishima had at one point had some dirt on Yokozawa, and initially, Yokozawa had seen him as nothing more than an annoying man who took pleasure in yanking him around against his will—but now, he saw sharing their days together as practically a given, perfectly natural.

Accomplished in his work and hard on both himself and others, in his private life Kirishima was nothing more than a father who liked to play the occasional prank and was rather unskilled with his fingers.

"Good grief; what were you *thinking* sending me that kind of thing? I wouldn't be able to drive the two of you home!"

"Nah, it's fine; it was non-alcoholic."

He and Kirishima had never been particularly close before, but sharing a drink together one rainy evening had started to bridge the distance between them. Yokozawa had been dragged out for more drinks after that, eventually even being invited to Kirishima's home, where he'd met his daughter, Hiyori.

An intelligent, outgoing little girl, she hadn't been fazed at all by Yokozawa's rather intimidating mien, instead taking right to him. Her honest, straightforward nature was a sign of what a wonderful job Kirishima had done in raising her.

But Yokozawa had learned that Kirishima was a slob around his daughter and utterly hopeless in the kitchen—and things like this

gap between his skill in the office and lack thereof at home had caused Yokozawa to grow more and more interested in Kirishima with each new facet of the man he was introduced to, until without even realizing it, he'd become utterly enthralled.

Simply *being* with Kirishima had helped Yokozawa to recognize all of the as-yet-unrealized emotions he had trapped within himself. It was Kirishima...who had taught him that being in love with someone could be more than just *pain*.

"Ooh, look look! I got one without alcohol in it too!" The cocktail Hiyori was nursing had a pale pink color floating at the bottom and was garnished with a cherry. She was obviously enjoying this opportunity to share in this adult atmosphere she would normally have been barred from.

"Ah, that reminds me—how did your ring bearing duties go? No problems?"

"Nope! I was a little nervous, but I managed to do it! The bride was sooo pretty!"

"Yeah, it was a nice ceremony. Think I may have synchronized with the father of the bride there for a bit."

"Sure it wasn't just a sympathetic sniffle?"

"No way—and I made sure to capture Hiyo's gallant figure, so I'll show you the video later." He waved his cell phone for show.

"Don't make fun of me if I've got a weird look on my face, 'kay?"

"I'd never do that—your dress is really cute, by the way. It suits you."

"Really?? Thank you!"

Looking perhaps as if it had been made to match the bride's own, Hiyori's dress was pure white fabric with a glossy sheen and an aqua blue ribbon cinched at the waist, rather impactful, with puffed sleeves and a knee-length skirt, and the hem and cuffs were decorated with delicate flower-patterned lace—she looked like she was a princess who'd stepped right off the pages of a storybook.

It looked like she'd had her hair and makeup done by a professional stylist, for her hair had been rolled into little buns and decorated with fake flowers, and she had a light dusting of makeup

covering her features. All of this worked together to make her look a bit older than she actually was.

While it had only been a mere six months since he'd first met her, a child's growth was remarkable. Girls Hiyori's age in particular tended to be more sound of mind than they seemed, and when Yokozawa tried to recall how he had behaved when *he* was in fifth grade, he knew he hadn't been as mature as Hiyori.

"The bouquet was really beautiful, too, and the wedding cake was adorable! It almost seemed like a waste to cut it up! Ooh, and she changed out of her dress into a kimono too—and *man* was it cute!"

Hiyori seemed unable to contain her excitement at attending her first glamorous event. Weddings were probably chock full of all sorts of things little girls dream about.

"She's been like this all day," Kirishima explained. "Hey—I don't want to hear any *Ooh I can't wait to get married~* out of you, young lady."

"I'm not sure about getting married—but I really want to wear a kimono..."

"Yeah, I guess the last time you wore one would've been your *Shichigosan* festival, huh? How about wearing one for *hatsumoude* on New Year's, then?"

"Can we??"

"Sure; and while we're at it, maybe Yokozawa and I'll wear one too."

"*What?* You two can get dressed up if you like, but leave me out of it."

"Aww, but I bet you'd look really good in some hakama, Oniichan!"

"I concur."

"I'll be *just fine* snapping pictures." He struggled to change the subject to remove attention from himself. "Enough about the kimono though—tell me more about the wedding. Didn't anything else happen?"

"Hmm...oh, right! There were a toooon of people telling Dad how good he looked!" She spoke as if this were the juiciest bit of gossip

around, obviously thrilled she was being given a chance to praise her father.

Even without seeing it in person, Yokozawa could easily imagine Kirishima receiving compliments. With his fantastic build, he struck quite a handsome figure when he cleaned up, and today he was dressed in a suit with a soft luster to the fabric and leather loafers, a handkerchief hanging from his vest pocket and a necktie with a tie pin tight at the collar.

Given that he hardly ever wore ties, Kirishima seemed a bit uncomfortable, but he tended to draw gazes when he tugged it loose. Every year at office parties, he always drew a crowd, without fail, so it was hardly surprising to hear that he'd stood out at today's event.

"C'mon, Hiyo—you don't need to talk about that kind of stuff."

"Huh? But why not? Ooh, I get it! You're *embarrassed*, aren't you, Dad?" His expression waxed a bit uncomfortable at the rare bout of teasing from his daughter, and Yokozawa supposed that even Kirishima might feel embarrassed at hearing his daughter speak about him that way. "You should've seen it! All the ladies were crowding around him, it was chaos! I was shocked at how popular he was! But he looks really good in a necktie—don'tcha think, Oniichan?"

"Huh? Oh—uh, yeah." His eyes swam at having the conversation abruptly turned his way, and while he'd intended to just offer his casual agreement, his voice broke, tone going a bit falsetto.

It was just his luck that Kirishima jumped on this: "Hey, what was with that hesitation?"

"It's—nothing, nothing." The last thing he wanted was for Kirishima to realize that he'd gotten a bit lost in staring at him. He probably *already* knew, but at the very least, Yokozawa had no intention of owning up to it.

"Oh, *nothing*, is it?"

"——" In an attempt to hide his unease from the leering Kirishima, he reached for his untouched cocktail glass. It wasn't as sweet as he'd feared it might be, and instead, the refreshing scent of citrus wafted into his nose.

But while Hiyori had been merrily chattering on about her experience thus far, her expression soured a bit here, as if she'd just

remembered something unsavory. “But...I really didn’t like how all the ladies kept asking *don’t you want a new mommy...*”

Yokozawa jolted at her words, spoken as she puffed out her cheeks in irritation. “Huh?”

Apparently Kirishima had been urged to remarry by some of his relatives. He’d thought it strange that Kirishima hadn’t taken the inch Hiyori had given him by praising him out to the mile he usually did, and now he understood why.

Even with a daughter, Kirishima was still a prize catch as far as marriage material went; he had an impressive job as the editor-in-chief of one of the flagship magazines for a famous publishing house, and he wasn’t hard on the eyes, either. His daughter was affectionate and polite and bright, as well. It was hardly surprising that his relatives had seen the wedding reception as an opportunity to do some introductions.

“And...how did you react to that?” he casually asked her, struggling not to reveal his unease.

“I told them I had my dad, so I didn’t want anyone else. And Grandma and Grandpa are really nice—plus I’ve got you and Sora-chan! And wouldn’t it be kinda weird to ask Dad for a new Mom just because I want one?” She turned on Yokozawa with an expression begging his agreement. It sounded as if the family had sought to use Hiyori as a way to prod Kirishima when the man himself had seemed loath to discuss remarrying.

“And...they accepted that?” Yokozawa had the feeling that particularly nosy relatives wouldn’t be put off so easily.

“Well, they were a little persistent, but I told them I had more important things to worry about right now—and that I wanted to do right by those things. They seemed to understand that, right Hiyo?”

“Yup!”

After exchanging a smile with Hiyori, Kirishima shifted his gaze to meet Yokozawa’s, and he felt a shudder ripple through his body at the suggestive look in those eyes. Those words just now...hadn’t just been for Hiyori; they’d been directed at *him*, too, and on realizing this, Yokozawa felt his cheeks slowly begin to heat with a flush.

He attempted to hide his embarrassment by knocking back the rest of his cocktail in one go; it was one thing to hear such things

in private, when it was just the two of them—but he *really* wished Kirishima would stop causing such trouble when *Hiyori* was around. Yokozawa had never been adept at keeping up a poker face, after all.

“Well, Sorata’s waiting for us, so shall we head out?”

“Yeah—let’s head home. *Hiyo* looks worn out.”

“Hey, I’m still wide awake!” She didn’t seem to realize it herself, but her expression said she was mere moments away from nodding off. By the looks of things, her battery was just about to give out.

“You’re just running on fumes; I don’t want to hear any whining for a piggy back ride if you fall asleep on the way home, got it?”

“Geez, I’m not *that* much of a kid anymore!” She puffed her cheeks out in irritation at Kirishima’s teasing, and the two adults took on fond expressions at this adorable gesture.

By the time they reached the apartments, the sky was washed over with a warm orange color. Yokozawa pulled into the complex garage, calling out to the pair beside him in the silence that fell after he cut the engine, “...Hey, we’re home.”

“...Huh? We’re already here? I fell asleep?” *Hiyori* blinked blearily at Yokozawa’s voice, glancing around at her surroundings, and Yokozawa’s eyes crinkled with mirth at the endearing reaction.

“You both conked out the moment I put the car in gear.” She’d likely been exhausted from a combination of having been entrusted with such a great responsibility as well as attending festivities she wasn’t used to experiencing. She’d immediately fallen silent when the car had pulled out—just as he’d expected, her battery had finally died.

He’d held off much conversation to keep from waking her—and in short order, the sounds of Kirishima’s soft snores had reached his ears from the passenger seat. *Like father, like daughter*, he’d supposed, given how alike they looked when asleep, their heads cocked at the same angle against the window providing an amusing image. If he hadn’t been driving, he would have liked to snap a picture for posterity.

“Wow, I feel like I had a nice little snooze, too.” Kirishima twisted his neck around to relax his stiff muscles, looking rather refreshed, and Yokozawa recalled hearing that short naps were perfect for relieving fatigue.

"I'm sure you're both exhausted. No staying up late tonight—head *straight* to bed."

"Yessir~" Hiyori responded primly with perfect manners.

"Thanks, Yokozawa; you really helped by playing chauffeur today."

"No, it's fine; being able to drive in to work helped me out as well." Commuting by car was generally frowned upon by the company, but it *was* allowed for employees coming in on their day off or for special reasons. As such, workers heading to the office on weekends and holidays typically did so by car.

Kirishima slid out of the passenger seat and turned to open the rear passenger door, extending his hand to the still-groggy Hiyori. "Your hand, milady."

"Hehee, I kinda feel like a princess!"

"It's still my job to escort you, for now."

Yokozawa supposed that Kirishima had entertained his own share of thoughts watching the bride be handed off to her new husband today. Hiyori politely took his hand and hopped out of the car. While she might start rebelling a bit as she entered puberty, for now, there were no such signs of discord—and if someone had asked her who her most favorite person in the whole wide world was, she'd probably still answer 'my dad'.

If he ignored the parts where Kirishima was kind of a slob and utterly hopeless in the kitchen, he really was an ideal father. He gave 110% at the office but still made time for his family, and while he was strict with his child, he still considered her feelings thoughtfully.

His basic 'ingredients' were already good, so when you compounded that with the fact that he took pride in what he wore and how he looked, it was little surprise that Hiyori's classmates saw him as a 'cool dad'. She seemed genuinely pleased whenever he praised her and never missed an opportunity to relate this fact to Yokozawa.

"I wonder if Sora-chan's waiting for us~"

"He's been alone since this morning, so he's probably in a pissy mood. He's so spoiled with Hiyo." While Sorata had always played it rather cool with Yokozawa, he seemed to become a completely

different animal when he was around Hiyori, utterly at ease and eager to have her fawn over him.

“That’s ‘cause we’re good friends!”

“He’s been really cold with me lately; I’ll call out to him and he won’t even lift his head to look at me.” Often times he’d just stay curled up on the little seat he’d claimed as his own and just flick his ears in response.

“He’s just shy~ He likes to go check out the genkan a lot on days when you don’t come, Oniichan! He’s definitely thinking something like *I wonder if he’ll come today...*!”

“Wait, seriously?” It was strange, hearing what Sorata was like when Yokozawa wasn’t around.

“Sounds like he’s a *tsundere*—just like his owner.”

“I’m not a *tsundere*!” He made a sour face at the disturbing turn the conversation was taking and entered the lobby of the apartment complex. As they opened the autolock and stepped through, they found a young girl about Hiyori’s age waiting for the elevator.

“Ah, Saho-chan!”

“Hiyo-chan?”

It seemed they were friends, and Hiyori quickly jogged over to greet the young girl. The girl, apparently acquainted with Kirishima as well, offered a polite greeting to him. “Good evening, Hiyo-chan’s father.”

“Evening.”

The ‘Saho’ girl seemed brimming with curiosity over Hiyori’s outfit. “Hey...what’s with the dress? It’s super cute!”

“We went to a relative’s wedding today. I got to wear this ‘cause I helped out with the ceremony.”

“Wow, that sounds like fun! You’re so lucky...all I got to do today was take practice exams at cram school. It was a total wash...” The large bookbag hanging from the girl’s back was likely jam-packed with all sorts of study materials. Yokozawa himself had started attending cram school rather early on in elementary school—likely in large part because his parents were more comfortable that way than leaving him on his own at home. It helped that the lessons at cram school were

a lot easier to digest than those in his regular classes, and he recalled enjoying being able to make friends with students from other schools.

“Oh right...you go to cram school. Must be rough!”

“Yeah, but I’m working hard to get into a school I really want to go to! Oh—are we at the 5th floor already? Well, see ya later!” The elevator drew to a stop, and when the doors opened, Saho darted off with a backwards wave to Hiyori.

As the doors closed again, Yokozawa asked, “A classmate?”

“No, not anymore—we were in the same class in 4th grade, but we got separated when classes changed this year.” Her voice sounded a bit disheartened, and her spirits seemed lower. She’d been rather upbeat until just a moment ago, so the shift in dynamics was a bit concerning. He hadn’t noticed anything in their conversation that might explain the mood change, but something could have conceivably transpired that he, as a man, hadn’t picked up on.

While he wanted to press for the reason behind Hiyori’s torn expression, he understood that sometimes people just wanted to be left alone. As he was pondering whether or not he ought to confront her, though, they arrived at the Kirishimas’ apartment.

“Sora-chan, we’re back~!” As if he’d sensed their arrival, Sorata was already waiting for them in the genkan. He quickly wound himself about Hiyori’s legs, begging to be picked up—which Hiyori did, with a *Thanks for watching the apartment!*, and he narrowed his eyes in happy satisfaction.

“What’re we doing for dinner?”

“I’m actually still kinda full from earlier, so how about we push it back a bit? Oh—unless you were hungry?”

“I had a snack before I met up with you two at the hotel, so I’m fine for now.”

“Then how about around 8? Let’s just throw something together.” Dinner was generally taken relatively early in the Kirishima home, for Hiyori’s sake, but when Yokozawa considered his meal times before he’d met the pair, 8 PM was still rather early for him.

“You say ‘just throw something together’, when you won’t even be making the damn meal.”

“And you have my *eternal* gratitude for that—hey, what’s wrong, Hiyo?”

“Eh?”

“You’re making a weird face—it’s all wrinkly riiiiight here.” He pressed a finger between his brows, approaching the issue head on where Yokozawa had been dithering about unsure if he should say anything or not.

Hiyori’s hands immediately went to her own brows at her father’s comment. “Huh, I am?”

“You worrying about something?”

Yokozawa wondered if it was really a good idea to be so blunt, but while he worried about the direction of the conversation, Hiyori voiced her concerns with some hesitation. “Well, it’s not really that I’m worrying or anything... I was just thinking that maybe it would be a good idea for me to go to cram school too...”

“What’s with that all of a sudden; your grades are fine without cram school, aren’t they?” While she’d had difficulties with math, Hiyori was generally good with her studies. Kirishima usually looked over her work, too, and Yokozawa helped her out with the subjects she found confusing. If she were aiming to take exams to enter a school of her choice, then sure, some sort of specialized study sessions might be in order, but she should have no trouble making it into a local public school.

“Well, Saho-chan’s going, and there are other kids in my class who’ve started going now that we’re in the second semester, too. They’ve said they’re going to try and get into a private school.”

It sounded like her classroom environment had changed a bit after summer vacation. Once kids entered 5th grade, they tended to focus more on cram school sessions than club practice.

“Ah...yeah, I guess you’re about at that age huh... Wow, time sure does fly. One more year and you’ll be in *middle school*.”

Middle school... at Kirishima’s softly spoken words, Yokozawa felt himself get a bit choked up as well. Hiyori was a bit small for her age, but she was growing day by day. He’d been so enthralled with how she looked in her dress that he hadn’t noticed she’d actually gotten

a bit taller of late as well—once she hit her growth spurt, she would shoot up like a weed.

“Yeah; I mean, I’ve still got more than a year left, but I was just wondering if it was such a good idea to be taking things so easy...”

“Well, what do you *want* to do? Do you want to take middle school exams?”

“Mm...I dunno. I don’t want to be separated from all my friends, but...” The hesitation and confusion were evident in her voice; it seemed she still hadn’t made up her mind yet. All of her worries and concerns about the changes around her had apparently been brought to the forefront of her mind on running into her friend coming home from cram school.

“Then—why not take a trial cram school course? I’m pretty sure they have those sorts of things. We can even get a tour of a private middle school too, if you want. Can’t very well make up your mind if you’ve never tried it, right?”

“You don’t mind?”

“C’mon, what’re you holding back for? Of course I don’t mind. If there’s something you want to do, you should just go for it. You might find it’s not really for you, but that’s still way better than regretting never trying it at all.”

“Thanks, Dad!”

“Given your grades, I’m sure you’ll be able to pull it off, even starting this late. You’re not really attending any other practice sessions right now, so cram school might be good for you.”

“He’s got a point,” Yokozawa concurred. He recalled, as a child, feeling like he’d had all the time in the world, but looking back now, he often wished he’d tried so many other things. Whenever an opportunity to try something new presented itself, it was always a good idea to just *go for it*.

“Well, for now, how about we get the documentation together? And why don’t you talk to your friend about it?”

“Kay, I’ll do that!” Seemingly relieved to have her concerns resolved at last, Hiyori’s usual bright expression returned to her features—settling Yokozawa’s nerves as well. “Did you ever have anything you wished you’d done as a kid, Dad?”

“Me? Not really, since I pretty much did whatever I wanted, but if I had to say something...I do sometimes wish I hadn’t goofed off as much and read some more books. Reading the same book as a kid and an adult feels completely different, after all.”

“It does?”

“Adults and kids have different imaginations. I’m kinda jealous of you, having so many books you can still read and enjoy like that. But—what the heck are we all doing still standing around like this? Run and get changed, and I’ll get everything set up so we can show Yokozawa the video I took of you earlier.”

“Kay!” She set Sorata back onto the floor and then hurried into her room to change out of her dress.

As he watched her leave, Yokozawa remarked softly, “...Girls sure do think deeply about things.” Thinking back to when he had been her age, he couldn’t recall ever really being concerned about *the future*. He’d gone to cram school, but memories of chatting with friends before and after the lessons and sharing stupid, funny stories were starker than any actual *learning*.

He’d often been asked what he wanted to be when he grew up, but when he’d answered ‘an office worker’, he’d always been met with shock. Still, he maintained that it hadn’t just been a random, half-assed choice; seeing his parents both working so hard, he’d really come to appreciate the importance of a hard day’s work. In that sense, he’d truly looked up to them in his own way as a child.

“Well, they mature faster than boys. But still...Hiyori as a middle school student... I feel like just the other day she was still calling me *Papa*...” Kirishima reminisced, staring off into space. One year might feel long to a child, but to the adults watching over that child, it would pass by in a flash. They’d probably be taken aback by how fast she’d grow up.

“She’s gonna be an adult before you know it; you’ll probably have to give her away at the altar pretty soon, huh?” Even discounting his obvious bias, Yokozawa maintained that Hiyori was quite cute. She could be a little ditzy at times, but she was serious and straightforward and had a kind, gentle personality. Recalling that there was already a young man pining after her, he was sure that her popularity among

classmates would only grow with time. It would be quite a chore to ensure that no nasty little bugs approached her.

“Well I’m not giving her away to any half-assed men.”

“As I recall, you previously said you’d never give her away *period...*” Yokozawa remarked, noting the shift in Kirishima’s words from before. What had changed in his mindset between now and then?

“Well, I *do* want to see her as a bride...and I guess I’ve started thinking that maybe I wouldn’t mind giving my blessing to a man I approved of. But—still, I can’t imagine there are too many of *those* floating around.”

“Uh, I’m pretty sure the *first* problem would be finding a man *Hiyori* approves of—and those are probably even rarer.” The closest man in Hiyori’s life right now was her own father—Kirishima. Whether he realized it or not, he’d inadvertently set the bar for all subsequent suitors rather high. Men who weren’t a better match than Kirishima—or at least as *good as*—were never even going to ping Hiyori’s radar.

“What makes you say that?” Kirishima asked in genuine confusion at Yokozawa’s bitter smile.

“...You seriously don’t know? Wow, you are *really* thick when it comes to that daughter of yours...”

“Hey—you’re the *last* person I want to hear shit like that from.”

“Daughters hardly ever go for any man they don’t think can outstrip their fathers. So don’t worry—she’ll nab a good man. Someone *just* like you.”

“Me?” Yokozawa had assumed this would thrill Kirishima, but instead, the man’s expression grew serious.

“What, you don’t want her bringing home someone like yourself?”

“Of course not. I’d go gray with worry if she showed up with some flake of a guy whose only saving grace was his silver tongue.”

“...So you *do* have some self-awareness.” He was flabbergasted by how seriously Kirishima was speaking his concerns; it seemed he really *was* worried about this issue—but he could hardly say as such to *some flake of a guy whose only saving grace was his silver tongue*, as it were.

“Shit...what the hell am I gonna do if she brings home someone like *me*?”

“Sounds to me like it’s the father who’s got bigger things to worry about now...” Yokozawa chuckled, taking in Kirishima’s expression as he held his head and agonized over future possibilities. He’d never accept her bringing home a good-for-nothing, but it would prove equally difficult for him to welcome with open arms someone breathtakingly charming. “Then what kind of man *would* you like to see her with?”

“I dunno...I guess if I had a choice, I’d want her with someone kinda like you.”

“Me?” His eyes went wide with shock at the unexpected admission, never having expected *his* name to come up in this conversation.

“You’re good with office work, but you can handle yourself around the house as well—but you’re not *so* good that she’d have to worry about you cheating on her. She could do a lot worse than someone like you for a husband.”

“Well *thanks*.” He wasn’t sure some parts of that interlude had been entirely complimentary, but knew that if he pressed, Kirishima would probably say something ridiculous.

“She’s my daughter; maybe we have similar tastes. But if she were to fall in love with you, then...”

He quickly fixed Kirishima with an unamused gaze, not liking the direction the conversation was trending. “Idiot; Hiyo has more than her fair share of men to choose from.”

“You seriously don’t understand your own self-worth. Shall we ask Hiyo later for confirmation?”

“Absolutely not! What if it makes her uncomfortable!”

Conversations like this, discussing the future with Kirishima, still left Yokozawa feeling rather odd. He actually *had* someone here he could talk about his future with...and that, in and of itself, was something of a miracle.

Falling in love with someone was something anyone could do on their own—but for the other person to love you back? Well *that*...was all up to fate. No matter how hard you worked to make them look at you, to *care* for you, it was ultimately that person’s own decision as to whether or not you merited their affections. And while you

might feel flattered when approached by someone you had feelings for yourself, receiving such attentions from someone you *didn't* care for would amount to little more than an annoyance.

Initially, he'd seen Kirishima as nothing more than a frustrating irritation of a man. With the threat of blackmail over a certain *image* floating over his head, Yokozawa hadn't had much choice in the matter, with Kirishima's meddlesome, shameless actions grating on his every nerve.

But he felt now that it was that overwhelming irritation that had him thinking about nothing but *Kirishima Kirishima Kirishima* day in and day out, until before he realized it, the man had become an amazingly important part of Yokozawa. He'd been shocked at the feelings that had crept inside without his noticing, putting down roots and sprouting into full blossom, and hadn't been able to accept it initially. But the more stubbornly he tried to deny the feelings, the more he'd been forced to accept that there was no way to excuse them.

Kirishima leaned forward, bringing their faces close and dropping his voice to whisper into Yokozawa's ear, "...Well, even if she *did* fall for you, I've got no intention of giving you up."

"Huh?"

"I'm saying *you're mine*."

"Y...you don't have to...go out of your way to say stuff like that all the time." He elbowed the leering Kirishima in the chest to push him out of the way, stepping back to place some space between them. Despite the serious mien he'd been wearing before, he now seemed back in his usual spirits.

Yokozawa still couldn't fathom why on earth Kirishima had chosen him, and while he knew that sometimes human emotions were just *illogical*, his own self-doubt and lack of confidence sometimes led him to crave a reason he could agree with.

Maybe with time, these doubts would ease—the more time they spent together, the deeper these bonds would become.

"Time...huh..."

It was here that he felt something tug insistently within his chest—but he couldn't quite place his finger on *what*.

"You say something?"

“Ah—no, nothing. Hey, you’d better get a move on, Hiyo’ll be back any second. Shouldn’t you get changed, too?”

“Oh yeah, guess so. Shouldn’t be standing around talking like this.” He tugged at his necktie, turning to head into his room.

His attempt to cover up his mumblings to himself reminded Yokozawa here of the promise Kirishima had made to Hiyori. “We just need to hook up the recording device to the TV, right? I’ll take care of it, if you want.” If they didn’t hurry and get ready, Hiyori would finish changing.

“Yeah, sorry—do you mind? The instruction manual should be underneath.”

“Got it.” He probably just needed to move the recording to the player, and as he quickly ran his eyes over the manual, the strange heaviness in his chest he’d felt earlier dissipated into nothingness.

“Have a good day, Oniichan!”

“Go get ‘em. Take care.”

“R—right...”

Standing there in the genkan being seen off by a broadly grinning Kirishima and Hiyori, Yokozawa was reminded of how this moment was always so damn *embarrassing*, and his lifeless response was his pathetic attempt at hiding his shame. He just couldn’t calm down with the two of them leering at him with expressions that said they knew just how embarrassed he was.

“Sure you aren’t forgetting something?”

“Not that I know of...?” He’d made sure he had his phone today, and his laptop was in his satchel. He’d checked that he had his wallet too, so he shouldn’t have forgotten anything else.

“When we leave, we always say, ‘I’m off!’, right?”

“.....” Yokozawa’s words stuck in his throat as Kirishima pointed out the one thing he’d apparently forgotten. Greetings and such were an important part of interactions; he *knew* he really ought to say it. But it was so *awkward* right now that he’d done his level best to avoid doing so. Even for such a trivial little phrase, it was just embarrassing to go out of his way to say it to Kirishima’s face *now*.

If he'd just been faced with Kirishima, he could have tossed out a *screw you* and headed off, but Hiyori was standing here as well, and at length, he reluctantly spoke, "...I'm off."

He then beat a hasty retreat out of the genkan, desperate to get away from the apartment as quickly as possible. "Ugh..." He then let out a great sigh and was on his way.

The reason he'd been lazing about at the Kirishimas' apartment on a Monday afternoon was because it was a holiday today. But despite having the day off, preparations for the fair were still looming, and he had a mountain of work to take care of—so he'd taken his leave a bit early in the hopes of getting whatever work he could do at home *done*.

Kirishima was usually the one griping at him not to bring work home, but given the rather irregular fair being put on this year, he'd demonstrated his understanding by throwing his support behind Yokozawa whenever he could.

Reviewing the next day's to-do list in his head, he stepped onto the elevator and lost himself for a moment to the soft swaying of the car as it descended—until the car jerked to an abrupt halt halfway down.

He took a step further in to give the new passenger boarding room to spare—but his eyes widened when he heard his name called. "Yokozawa-san?"

"Oh—hello." The man waiting to step onto the elevator was none other than Iokawa. An uncle of one of Hiyori's classmates, he was a salesman like Yokozawa working for Fujino Books. His gentle features were set off by the thick black-framed glasses he wore. They'd first met when Iokawa had accompanied his nephew to Kirishima's apartment to bring Hiyori a birthday present. After running into one another again at a bar, they'd gotten to know each other a bit better following a brief conversation.

For some reason, Yokozawa seemed to run into the man by accident quite a bit, and given that these run-ins by and large happened because of how often Yokozawa was over at the Kirishimas' apartment, it always made meetings like this just the tiniest bit awkward.

"Good afternoon. Were you at Kirishima-san's place just now?"

“Ah—yes.” It wasn’t like he was doing anything *wrong*, but he could hardly be frank about their relationship and was left with no choice but to reply to Iokawa’s question with a half-hearted smile.

“Oh—did you perhaps spend the night?”

“Uh...well, kind of...yeah.”

“I must confess I’m jealous of how good friends you two are.”

Yokozawa was growing a bit flustered with the borderline tactless questions, and in an effort to deflect Iokawa’s attentions, he pressed back with a question of his own. “Whereabouts are you headed, Iokawa-san?”

“Grocery run. I just realized I haven’t a crumb to eat around the house—guess that kind of thing can happen a lot when you’re living alone, don’t you think? Oh—but you kind of seem like you’d have a pretty good handle on keeping your meal situation organized.”

“Not at all; all I do when I get home is sleep, so my fridge is practically empty.” The only reason he’d gotten so adept at cooking of late was because of how often he was in and out of Kirishima’s place. He’d never *hated* cooking, per se, but it had always been something of a chore to cook for himself, so he’d settled for eating out or grabbing fast food or something from the convenience store.

“Oh, do you not cook? When I dropped by Kirishima-san’s place before, you were wearing an apron, so I just assumed you were comfortable in the kitchen.”

“Well, I do cook a bit—but it’s kind of a chore to cook for oneself. I normally subsist on fast food and convenience store fare, truthfully.” Cooking required the motivation of someone actually *wanting* to eat your food, taking *joy* in it. Maybe a gourmand could stomach it, but he personally found the thought of going all out on a meal he’d be the only one to enjoy just *tiresome*.

Now, though, he was doing his best to prepare delicious, nutritious meals for Hiyori; it really made the effort worthwhile when someone told you your food tasted delicious.

“I must admit that’s rather unexpected—you having a lazy side.”

“You really think it’s unexpected?”

“You seem like the type to take everything seriously and to see things through properly. I always thought you the type to put your all into everything you do.”

“Oh, not at all, I’m hardly...” He felt like Iokawa was overestimating him now—but just as he was set to relieve the man of his misconception, the elevator released a loud *CLANG*.

“Wha...?!”

The sound was quickly followed by the sensation of the car being jerked upward. Yokozawa reached for the wall to steady himself as he nearly lost his balance—and the elevator ground to a complete halt, although *not* because they’d arrived at their destination.



“Did we break down?”

“It seems so...”

Even straining to listen, he couldn't detect any sounds of machinery moving—all that was left was an eerie silence. Recalling an

incident on the news of an elevator plummeting to earth, he felt a chill run down his spine. Imagining the worst-case scenario, though, did nothing to change the fact that they were both helpless to change their current situation—so they might as well try to keep a positive outlook on the situation; that would be best mentally.

The elevator had been heading down, so even if the cable snapped for some reason, the impact shouldn't be that bad. They might suffer a few scrapes and bruises, but nothing life-threatening.

"I wonder if we can get the doors opened..." But after trying both the 'open doors' button as well as a button for another floor, while the buttons lit up, the elevator refused to budge.

"So I guess this means we're trapped..." Yokozawa muttered, addressing the situation with a sigh. While it would be nice if the power were quickly restored, they could just as easily be stuck here for *hours*. The only upside to the situation was that it was just the two of them here, meaning no children or elderly passengers had been on board to potentially suffer injury.

"I guess we should call for help, then? Let's see here...I guess we just push this button here, huh?" Iokawa pressed the emergency call button, and they were immediately connected to the managing agency.

"This is the managing agency! How can I help you?"

"The elevator seems to have stalled—and now we're stuck inside."

The staff member on the other end of the line apologized profusely to the rather even-keeled delivery, *"I'm terribly sorry about that! Is everyone all right?"*

"We're fine, no problems to speak of."

"I'll send someone right over, so could you give some further details?"

"I think we're stopped somewhere between the first and second floors, but beyond that, I'm a little fuzzy. The buttons light up when we press them, but the elevator isn't responding. How long do you think it'll be before we can get out?"

"Let's see...I'm afraid I can't be very specific without seeing the damage in person, but I'll have an attendant rush over as quickly as possible. I'm terribly sorry about this, but please wait a bit longer!"

"Thank you, then."

"It might be difficult to get cell phone reception inside the elevator, so if you need anything at all, please just press the call button." He sounded quite sorry for the inconvenience, cutting the line short with repeated apologies. The breakdown was pretty crappy luck, but at least they'd managed to contact the management agency quickly.

"Well there you have it."

"Terrible indeed..." If *this* was how he was going to wind up spending his afternoon, he could've just as easily stayed at the Kirishimas' place a bit longer. It wasn't as if he had nothing to occupy his time with, work-wise, but it was a bit awkward to do so with someone looming over his shoulder.

"Yokozawa-san, are you fine on time? I was just heading out shopping, so I'm hardly put-out by the situation, but..."

"I was just going to head home and do some work, but there's not exactly anything to be done about it now. At least it wasn't a workday." It sucked that the time was going to go to waste, but there was no use dithering over it now. If he'd been heading out for his morning commute on any other weekday, he'd be furious right now.

He considered trying to contact Kirishima but wasn't too sure how the service would be from inside the elevator—plus, he didn't want to worry the two of them unnecessarily.

"Well, I'm sure it'll take some time—so shall we sit down?"

They should probably prepare themselves for at least a one- to two-hour wait, so it was best to avoid unnecessary energy expenditure. Steeling himself for a long wait, Yokozawa slipped his cell phone into his bag to avoid draining the battery. "Yes, I suppose so."

He settled onto the floor of the elevator and placed his bag to the side. If this were a movie, they could probably pry open the door or escape through a ceiling hatch—but that was all possible because it was *fiction*. Here in the real world, they could only settle in and wait for the repairman to arrive.

While he normally wouldn't have had any problem being in an elevator, though, when he remembered that they were locked in here together, a strange sense of being trapped crept over him. If he'd been alone, he probably could have coped...but he was here with *Iokawa* now, just the two of them.

A heavy silence stretched between them, and the one to finally break the awkward atmosphere was Iokawa. "Umm, I've wanted to ask you this for a while, but—what book shops do you oversee, Yokozawa-san?"

At the question, Yokozawa realized he simply needed to keep his job as the topic of discussion. It was, after all, really the only thing he and Iokawa had in common, and while there were differences in managing comics sales and children's books, they were both salesmen for publishing houses.

"I don't really have an area I'm responsible for, per se; I manage comics sales, though, so I can generally be found at shops those sell well at."

"That reminds me, it was in Ikebukuro where I ran into you before, wasn't it? I suppose the major player in comics sales around there would be...Books Marimo, then?"

"Indeed; I drop by quite often."

"They've set up a great children's books corner there too; I often wander around the comics area when I'm in the neighborhood, so we may have passed each other by and not even realized it!"

"It's a possibility." Books Marimo was a rather large chain store, with sales representatives from a number of publishing houses rubbing shoulders in its aisles. It was quite likely Iokawa had been among them.

"The section staff at Books Marimo always go all-out in keeping their areas looking nice, but the comics corner's display is always a sight to see! I often fall prey to the recommendations—they all look so interesting, like you can't go wrong!"

"There's a part-timer who really does a great job putting together the displays for the basement floor." The reason it stood out more than other areas was because the art school student in charge of the shoujo manga shelves put in far more effort than was called for. He liked to say he was doing it purely because he wanted to, but whatever the reason, Yokozawa was grateful.

"Oh, really? I suppose that sort of effort would thrill any publisher!"

"Whereabouts do you frequent, aside from Marimo?"

"I drop by the Jinbouchou area quite a bit, I suppose. But we don't exactly have a huge sales staff, so I go wherever I'm needed. I've had a ton of out-of-town business trips this year."

"I'm off on business trips quite a bit as well. But it's always nice seeing your books lining the shelves of new shops you're visiting for the first time."

"Indeed! It's great seeing that they're pushing your stock. I love seeing the books they have on display and imagining *ooh I bet students come to this shop a lot or I wonder if lots of parents bring their children here.*"

The customer populace varied quite drastically depending on where a shop was positioned, with some catering more to schoolchildren and others more to office workers; Books Marimo was particularly popular with families, strangely enough.

"That reminds me—do you spend the night at Kirishima-san's place often?"

"Huh?" Yokozawa jolted at the question thrown his way, completely caught off-guard. "Oh, no, just—he had to go to a relative's wedding yesterday, so I was pulled into playing chauffeur after work." While he was telling the complete and utter truth, though, his tone somehow made it sound as if he were making the entire thing up. He could only hope Iokawa hadn't caught on to how shaken up he was by the turn in the conversation.

"Oh, I see! That sounds nice—a wedding! I was in an old friend's wedding last year, and it was so nice, I actually got a little choked up! Kind of felt like the father of the bride."

"That reminds me, he said something along the same line," Yokozawa remarked, recalling Kirishima's words. "That he synchronized with the bride's father, and it made him start thinking about all kinds of things."

"I suppose it must have been even stranger for him, being in the audience there—seeing as he has a daughter of his own. Hiyori-chan's awfully cute, so I can imagine he won't want to give her away. Our Yuuto will wind up as another annoying bug to be crushed."

"I'm sure that's not true—they went out shopping together and to see a movie just the other day, didn't they?"

“Eh?! When did they start going out on *dates*?!”

It seemed Iokawa had not been privy to his nephews outing, and Yokozawa scrambled to collect himself. “Ah–no, I didn’t mean—I don’t think it was really a *date*...” He couldn’t help the bitter smile at the hopeful expression Iokawa turned his way.

Unfortunately, given Hiyori’s attitude, she didn’t see the boy as a *boy*—he was simply another one of her friends. Which was likely precisely why Kirishima wasn’t pitching a fit over her associating with him, instead watching over them calmly.

While he and Kirishima had snuck off to tail the pair when they’d gone out together, Yokozawa suspected that a large part of the reason for the excursion had simply been to have a bit of fun with Yokozawa.

“It’s kind of sad that all I can really do as his uncle is cheer him on. But well, I suppose I first ought to worry about my *own* relationships... Have you ever thought about getting married, Yokozawa-san?”

“Huh?” was the only stupid response he could manage as his head struggled to keep up with the sharp turn in conversation. It was a rather sensitive issue to bring up all of a sudden, and while Kirishima’s face had popped into his mind for a moment, he’d quickly shoved it into a far corner of his mind for the time being.

“Well, when you get to be our age, your parents really start hounding you about that kind of thing, right? Pestering you, wondering if you’ve found someone nice yet. Though ever since I got dumped, they haven’t breathed a word about marriage to me...”

“Ah, right...” Realizing now what had brought the question on, he breathed a silent sigh of relief.

“I guess I’m finally at the age where I ought to settle down. Though I’ll admit it doesn’t really *feel* like it.” Iokawa’s words, mingled with a soft sigh of resignation, seemed to reflect the reality of their generation. Yokozawa had endured similar ponderings from his own relatives, but they’d mostly been delivered with the same sense of urgency as a conversation on the state of the recent weather, so he’d always just more or less ignored the questions.

“You probably don’t really need to get so worked up about it, I think.”

“So you’re in the ‘never getting married’ segment, then, Yokozawa-san?”

“It’s more that I feel like if there’s someone you *want* to marry, you probably should, but if there isn’t, then there’s no need to force yourself. Though I of course understand that everyone has their own opinion on the matter, and there’s always the view of spouse-hunting as simply being another way to meet The One.”

It all came down to that *fated bond*—for every tale of people who’d gotten hitched right after meeting, there were probably many others who felt drawn to one another but simply never settled down together.

Yokozawa himself had never really been interested in marrying; he’d just never seen it as something he needed in his life. Both his parents had always been so busy, he’d never really had that ‘happy family life’. But they’d been good parents, and he’d never been on bad terms with them, nor felt like they hadn’t loved him. Even now, with a fair bit of distance between them, they had a decent relationship. Maybe it was just because his parents had always been reasonably even-keeled. That was probably why he’d never seen marriage as something absolutely necessary in life.

However—while he’d never really aspired to domestic life before...after witnessing Hiyori and Kirishima’s parent-child relationship, his viewpoint had started to change just a little. Having someone to care for—family to protect—gave you the drive to tackle the day ahead. Hiyori was probably the reason Kirishima was so full of energy all the time.

Yokozawa couldn’t help but respect the way he never missed a beat in his work nor neglected his daughter. Every day since he and Kirishima had started seeing one another felt almost like a dream, leaving him thinking he couldn’t *wait* for the next day to come—something he hadn’t felt since childhood.

“So can I take that to mean there’s no one you’d like to marry right now?”

He gave a start at the question Iokawa lobbed at him while he’d been distracted. He really didn’t like discussing his private life like this, but at the same time, he didn’t want to outright *lie*. “...I’m perfectly

content to be able to be with the person I care for without having to put a name to that relationship. That's how I feel."

Kirishima was a man, after all, and gay marriages weren't recognized under Japanese law—and then there was the fact that social acceptance still hadn't caught up. Plus, even if those issues were magically resolved, there was still *Hiyori*—she was the one Kirishima needed to put ahead of all others; it was only natural for Yokozawa to come second.

If Yokozawa's and Kirishima's relationship were to change in the future, it would probably be due to some shift in the environment between them in light of Hiyori's own growth. Sure, she looked up to them now as a carefree elementary school child, but once she hit middle and high school, she might realize the true nature of their relationship.

It was already strange for a bachelor like Yokozawa to be flitting in and out of the home of a single father and his daughter. Kirishima always made sure to have his back, so he'd at least avoided coming off like some creepy stranger hanging around the complex, but if he'd been one of Kirishima's neighbors, he might have found the whole situation just a *bit* strange.

He wouldn't be surprised if Hiyori started feeling uncomfortable around him. If he thought she might be growing wary of him, he'd have to take his leave as quickly as possible. He saw the both of them—not only Kirishima, but Hiyori as well—as something precious to him; he'd rather die than do anything that might hurt her.

"—"

Yokozawa froze at his own thoughts—perhaps *this* was the strange sensation he'd felt clutching at him the previous evening.

He could all too easily imagine their happy futures...but he couldn't see himself there *with them*. If he were a relative—or even an old friend, he could probably drum up some flimsy excuse for their relationship, but it was far from *normal* for a male lover to be a part of their happy little family.

"But I suppose a marriage is a kind of contract. Unlike an ordinary romantic affair, a marriage seals your relationship in the eyes of the law. Isn't it a bit unsettling to have someone you want to spend the rest of

your life with but not actually go the final step and marry them? You might not be able to bind their feelings to yours, but you can at least give yourself some piece of mind—and only at the price of a single slip of paper.”

While Yokozawa concurred for the most part with Iokawa's theory, it was difficult to apply it to a homosexual relationship like his and Kirishima's. “You may have a point there—but I suppose it comes down to the feelings of the couple involved.” The steady continuation of a relationship required the hard work and good will of both halves of the pair. Sitting there languishing in the love your partner lavished upon you placed a great, one-sided burden on them—but being too meddlesome could, in contrast, come off as annoying.

Yokozawa definitely saw himself as the ‘too meddlesome’ type, and thinking back on things he'd said and done in the heat of the moment after calming down, he often found himself unbearably irritating. As such, he'd started forcing himself to take a moment to breathe before acting.

Still, though, he likely often went overboard—with Kirishima's forgiving nature his only saving grace. Granted, the man himself had similar tendencies, so it was just as likely he felt himself in no position to judge Yokozawa—in that sense, they suited each other quite nicely; a mended lid for a cracked pot, as it were.

“You sure are mature, Yokozawa-san. You know who you are—you never get knocked off-course. You've more than earned my respect.”

“Oh hardly—I've still got quite a long ways to go. This is all a frantically placed mask.” At his own words, though, he recalled what Kirishima had said—how the side he showed the world was only skin-deep—and smiled inwardly that they'd wound up saying similar things.

“Really?”

“People used to be quite intimidated by me because of how often I raised my voice; you're much more suited for sales, given your gentle manner.” He couldn't help the wry smile that rose to his lips as he recalled his attitude until fairly recently.

After enduring Kirishima's lecture, he'd started to be more conscious of his attitude around others, and while he did still

occasionally fly off the handle and yell at some unfortunate coworker, he now always made sure to follow-up properly afterward. There'd been worry initially that he had come down with a fever or some horrific illness, but his workplace interactions had started to go a lot more smoothly with only a few extra words. The atmosphere around him had changed as well, and even his sales figures had improved.

Yokozawa had always assumed that motivation was something he had to create himself—so he'd been shocked at the changes around him. The fact that he'd never realized the true source of motivation, instead focusing on pure *ability*, was evidence of how truly naive he'd been.

"You think...? My sempai at work always tells me that I'm persistent—but not forceful enough..."

"Rather than forcing yourself to do something you're not used to, why not just focus on improving what you're already good at?"

"Something I'm already good at, huh... But, I'm afraid I don't quite know what that *is*."

"Then just make a goal for yourself—I want to be like *this*'. You could model yourself after your ideal person, if you've got one." While he wouldn't call Kirishima his *goal*, per se, Yokozawa did often reference the way he comported himself around the office. Despite his immature nature, the way he directed his subordinates and the way he could shift seamlessly from one subject to the next was something Yokozawa felt he could learn a lot from.

Kirishima never let any difficulties or failures get him down; he used these stumbling blocks instead to leap forward, turning it to his advantage. It was *amazing*. Granted, if he ever said such things to Kirishima himself, the guy would undoubtedly let it go to his head, and so to avoid such a situation, Yokozawa had resolved to never let these thoughts pass his lips.

"...Then, I'll make you my goal, Yokozawa-san."

"Huh? Wait—no, I'm hardly anything special." He'd never expected his own name to be offered here, and he grew flustered at the response from left field. If he'd been Kirishima, this would have probably been the point where he said something witty like *Go for it; mimic me all you can!*, but Yokozawa had nowhere near the self-confidence to do so.

Naturally he had some degree of confidence in his work, but he was far from ready to be anyone's measuring stick. The way he poured his whole self into his job was probably evidence enough of how lacking in confidence he was.

What he lacked in ability, he had no choice but to make up for with hard work—and while he still might never quite make it to the level he'd like to be at, floundering in vain hope was all he could really do.

"You're far too modest, Yokozawa-san. Though I suppose that's just another one of your more attractive features."

"Th-thanks..." His voice cracked at the compliment as he struggled for a response—why was Iokawa's gaze making him feel so uncomfortable right now...?

"Umm...there's actually something I've been meaning to ask...do you mind?"

"I...suppose not, so long as it's something I can answer." He would have agreed to just about anything now if it meant changing the subject—but his blood ran cold at the question that followed.

"You and Kirishima-san are dating, aren't you?"

"....." Words caught in Yokozawa's throat at the utterly unexpected question, but falling silent here was akin to *agreement*.

"I kind of got the feeling—but when Kirishima-san came to find you in the park the other day, that sealed it for me."

"W—no, that was..."

"Anyone would have realized, seeing how clearly jealous he was! You could tell he freaked out and charged in, guns blazing."

"———" At a loss for words, Yokozawa remained silent—which only encouraged Iokawa to continued his one-sided conversation.

"You remember how I got dumped by my girlfriend? I might have still had a chance with her if I'd chased her down. But I didn't. I couldn't bring myself to."

It had been sheer coincidence that Yokozawa had found himself present during Iokawa's breakup. While he'd been able to keep his wits about him, it was clear to anyone that he'd been utterly thrown by the situation.

"It was fun being around her, and we got along fairly well—but I think I was just doing it out of a sense of duty... Looking back, I'm not even sure I was going out with her because I actually liked her..."

Iokawa's words sent a shudder of unease through Yokozawa. "...So what are you trying to say?" He was starting to get a bad feeling.

He jolted, realizing that the grin had faded from the ever-upbeat Iokawa's features, and he flinched at the intent gaze fixed upon him—until Iokawa quickly relaxed into his usual gentle smile. "I'm saying that it was only after meeting *you* that I realized all of that."

"Me?"

"You've been on my mind, ever since that evening when I got dumped. I'd thought it so strange how I couldn't stop thinking about you...and then I realized what I was feeling after seeing how jealous Kirishima-san was. I think I'm in love with you."

"....." He'd started to get the feeling this confession was coming—but on hearing it finally delivered, he could do nothing but gape stupidly. Kirishima had been wary of Iokawa, but Yokozawa had never seriously thought—until today at least—that Iokawa might actually harbor *those* kinds of feelings for him.

Without even asking, it was clear he meant *romantic love*—he wasn't so thick as to mistake Iokawa's confession for anything else. But he still couldn't bring himself to just accept that this was happening to him, and while he forced his features to remain cool and even, inside he had descended into outright *panic*. He knew he needed to say *something*, but nothing came to mind, he couldn't—

"-?! What the *fuck* are you doing?!" The strange sensation of lips brushing over his own brought Yokozawa back to his senses, and he quickly shoved Iokawa away, wiping at his lips with his sleeve.

"I simply thought this might be an easier way to explain my feelings."

Yokozawa could only gape in shock at the nonchalant response, delivered with Iokawa's usual mild expression. Having missed the chance to blow up at the man, he groped for words. "Okay, listen here..."

"If I didn't try something like that, you never would have noticed me, would you?"

“Hey—” Yet another casual explanation, and Yokozawa struggled for words; it seemed Iokawa had a rather shameless side to him after all.

“Yokozawa-san, please go out with me.”

He forced himself to calm down with a few deep breaths, working to keep an even keel, and opened his mouth to respond. “Sorry—but I’m afraid I can’t return your feelings.” He didn’t even need to consider the proposition; this was the only answer he could give.

“Because you have Kirishima-san?”

“...Yeah.” There was no point in trying to hide their relationship any more. If he was going to maintain that he couldn’t return Iokawa’s feelings, he at least owed the man the truth as to *why*.

“I know I could never hope to compare with Kirishima-san. He’s cool, there’s no arguing about it, and he’s great at his job. But—I’m a bachelor, free to do as I please. I’m totally free from baggage.”

“Huh?” He froze at Iokawa’s pitch—and not because he’d been successfully seduced, but because of that *word: baggage*.

“Earlier, you said you were ‘perfectly content’ being able to be with the person you care for—but did you realize how worried your expression was when you said that?”

“!!”

“Ah—I supposed not. You’re the type to put your own thoughts and feelings last, after all.” He wanted to snap at Iokawa to mind his own business, but he swallowed his words. If he opened his mouth here, he’d very likely say something he would regret. His silence, though, only spurred Iokawa into growing more chatty.

“You’re *content*—that means you’ve given up, you realize?”

“That’s *not* what I—” But he couldn’t entirely refute the accusation—because Iokawa’s words had struck a chord within Yokozawa’s chest. He couldn’t deny that, somewhere deep down, he might have actually been harboring such feelings.

“See? You can’t deny it—because you *do* feel some uncertainty. You have to practice restraint because Kirishima-san has Hiyori-chan, right?”

“Wha...”

“I can understand your feelings—she’s the most important thing to Kirishima-san. I’m sure you care for her as well, so it’s only natural

you should put her needs above your own. Plus—do you actually think you'll be able to be with Kirishima-san so openly once she starts to get older?"

He could manage no response to Iokawa's verbal barrage. While he'd never once thought of Hiyori as any kind of *hindrance*, he'd be lying if he claimed he hadn't prepared himself to take his leave *just in case*. It was just a shock...that Iokawa had so clearly seen this.

"I..." He had to respond *somehow*. But as he opened his mouth—the speaker in the elevator crackled to life.

"Our sincerest apologies for the wait! We've completed repairs, so we'll restart the elevator now! The lights will dim for a moment, but they'll come right back on, so please don't worry."

"Thank you." Following their response, the lights flickered out, as warned. "Thank goodness—that was quicker than I imagined."

"Y—yeah..."

"Not that I would have minded getting to spend a little more time alone with you."

In sync with Iokawa's suggestive words, though, the lights flared back to life, and the elevator began to move—and Yokozawa bid silent thanks to the elevator for the distraction, as he'd been unable to find words to respond.

They quickly reached the first floor, and the doors opened as usual—revealing the building manager as well as the repair service representatives, waiting for the two of them with worried expressions. "Are you all right?!"

"Please accept our sincerest apologies for this incident!"

"Not at all—we're just glad you were able to come so quickly." A quick glance at the time revealed they'd been trapped for just under an hour—though it had felt like longer to Yokozawa, likely because he'd been alone with Iokawa the whole time. That had been a rather heavy conversation to endure with nowhere to run.

However, while he *had* rejected Iokawa verbally...the man didn't seem like he'd quite accepted it. He'd probably need to reiterate his feelings a bit more forcefully at a later date.

Even if he acknowledged that Iokawa did have a point—there was no way Yokozawa was ever going to choose him. He simply needed to take care of this before Kirishima found out—

“Well *that* was a nice little disaster; must’ve taken a lot out of you.”

The building manager and repairmen hadn’t been the only ones waiting for service to be restored, it seemed, and when Yokozawa glanced to where the voice had come from, he saw Kirishima relaxing against a wall. “What are you doing here...?”

“I came after you thinking I might offer to give you a lift, then I waited down here after I saw the elevator wasn’t working. Didn’t you see my texts?”

“Oh—sorry, I didn’t realize...” The reception had been terrible inside the elevator, but besides that, he hadn’t exactly been in a position where he could have checked for new messages. He’d been at his wits’ end just trying to respond to Iokawa’s brazen confession.

But while he’d held off contacting Kirishima in an effort not to worry him or Hiyori, it seemed his efforts had had the opposite effect.

“Well, at least you’re safe—though I can’t believe you wound up stuck in there with *him*.”

He froze at Kirishima’s words; their conversation shouldn’t have been audible to anyone outside the elevator. “We just happened to be riding down together.” But then again—he had nothing to be ashamed of; sure, it would’ve been embarrassing to have others bear witness to their conversation, but he could be frank with Kirishima about it and bear no repercussions.

“Yokozawa-san—I’ll be taking my leave now. It was wonderful having such a nice long chat with you.” With a polite little dip of his head, Iokawa disappeared.

“Ah—wai—” Yokozawa called out, worried that his rejection from earlier hadn’t been enough to put Iokawa off entirely, but on realizing theirs was hardly a conversation they could continue in public, he swallowed his words and let his outstretched hand fall back to his side, leaving him feeling ill at ease.

“What’s wrong?”

"Nothing." What else *could* he say, after all? He'd explained his feelings to Iokawa—he just wasn't sure the guy had accepted those feelings.

What exactly did he *see* in Yokozawa, anyway? He knew fully well he wasn't the type people usually fell for—and he could count the number of times they'd spoken on one hand. But while he knew there was no way he was ever going to understand what swayed someone else's heart when he couldn't even properly understand his *own* feelings, it was probably human nature to search for a reason he could accept.

"Well, shall we get going?"

"Huh? 'Get going'...? What about Hiyo?"

"She's watching the apartment—got a friend coming over, apparently to do some homework. My mom's dropping by later, and I've told her I'll be back by dinner, so we're golden."

"But—wait..."

"What *now*? Don't want me seeing you home?"

"That's not what I—"

"C'mon, let's hit the road. You've got work to catch up on, right?"

And unable to abandon Kirishima as he set off for the garage, Yokozawa at last followed dutifully behind.

The atmosphere inside the car was almost unbearably tense—but Yokozawa was likely the only one who felt that way, and when he noticed the scenery passing by outside shift to that of the area near his apartment, he breathed a silent sigh of relief.

"You can drop me off around here." He wanted this ride over as quickly as possible—but despite his request to be let off just before arriving at the complex, Kirishima whipped the steering wheel around and headed for the parking area at the rear of the apartments.

"I'm already here—so I thought I might trouble you for a cup of tea."

"...*Most* people wouldn't say that *themselves*."

"You're gonna go bald worrying over niggling little details like that."

He had a point, though; after having Kirishima drive him all the way home, he could hardly snap at him *No, you're in the way, get outta here*, so he reluctantly invited the man inside after directing him to park in one of the visitor spaces.

"It's been ages since I dropped by your place."

"I'll put on some coffee, so have a seat. And don't *touch* anything."

"Mmm, we'll see..."

"No, we *won't* see. Dammit..." Yokozawa was more than used to hearing Kirishima deliver ridiculous responses with a serious tone by now, though, and he at least was certain there was nothing lying around that he'd hate for Kirishima to discover—he even had *that* magazine lined up neatly on the bookshelf now.

Given that he usually only came home to sleep and had been spending fewer weekends here of late, the apartment was even less cluttered than usual. He didn't own many outfits, so he didn't really need a change of clothes—though he'd probably want to drag out his coat again soon.

When he carried the mugs of drip coffee in, he found Kirishima waiting patiently on the sofa—likely only because he'd run out of Yokozawa's things to rummage through, he mused, and moved to settle beside him, when—

"So, you ready to fess up about just what happened in that elevator?"

".....!" If he'd taken a sip of coffee, he probably would have spit it out right then. Struggling to recover his breath from nearly choking, he warily turned his gaze Kirishima's way—only to find him staring right back with a look that said he wasn't letting Yokozawa worm his way out of this one.

"He said something to you, didn't he?"

"That's..." He struggled for a response to Kirishima's sharp realization; perhaps the reason he hadn't brought this up in the car ride was because he'd been waiting for Yokozawa to mention it on his own. Evidently fed up with waiting, he'd decided to go on the offensive instead.

"It's just going to get harder to say if you keep putting it off, you realize—"

"I never said I wasn't going to say!" It was uncomfortable having that steady gaze fixed on him, and he fought the urge to stand and pace—what would be the point, with nowhere to run in this tiny room?

"...So?"

Kirishima's intense gaze made it difficult to speak—but they'd never get this over with if Yokozawa kept silent. Staring into the flat, black surface of the coffee before him, he forced his heavy lips to move. "...He said...he knew we were dating...and that he was in love with me."

"...I see."

Kirishima didn't show an ounce of surprise at the confession; he likely would have shown more shock if he'd been told it would rain the following day.

"...The hell was that reaction?"

"Just...kind of saw it coming."

"Saw it coming?"

"Did you seriously think I told you to keep your distance from him just because he rubbed me the wrong way? He clearly had the hots for you and I didn't want you getting near him. You are *seriously* thick when it comes to this kind of thing." His shoulders slumped, and he let out a forced sigh—a reaction he'd clearly practiced for just such an occasion and which pissed Yokozawa off to no end. But admittedly, he hadn't a leg to stand on just now, no excuses to make.

It was clear from Iokawa's confession that Kirishima's jealousy hadn't been unfounded in the least; Yokozawa was the one in the wrong, this time.

"....." While Yokozawa's silence here was due in part to reflecting on his actions, it could also be attributed to his hesitation over whether or not to confess to the *other* thing that had happened in that elevator. If Kirishima found out he'd not only been confessed to but had a kiss stolen, he'd undoubtedly be less *angry* and more speechless with shock. Yokozawa knew he'd let his guard down, but he couldn't bear to have Kirishima look at him any more coldly than he already was.

"...So did you turn him down?"

"More or less..."

“More or—what the hell does that mean?”

“I felt I did turn him down clearly, but...he was being kind of stubborn about it, and then before I could get into it with him, the elevator started back up, so...” He hadn’t meant for it to come out sounding like an excuse, but it did all the same. Looking back, though, he felt nothing he could have said would have swayed Iokawa.

He’d hit right on a point of unease that Yokozawa himself hadn’t even realized he’d been nursing, so as long as he was plagued by that worry, Iokawa would likely never give up on him.

He’d never seen himself as anyone worthy of being so *obsessive* over, but given Iokawa’s actions before, this incident was likely not the last of its kind.

“Then you want me to tell him off?”

“Absolutely not! I’ll take care of it myself.” He’d wanted to end this *before* Kirishima had found out—he had no intention of forcing Kirishima to dirty his hands with this mess, nor did he want to sink so low as to have someone fight his battles for him.

“Yeah, I figured—but don’t let it drag on, okay?”

“I won’t,” he responded, relieved that Kirishima seemed to understand. While admittedly a little thrown that the man hadn’t given him the needling lecture he’d been expecting, he supposed it only showed him they’d both matured.

“All right, I can’t hang around here all day bothering you—I’m heading out. You *did* come back to get some work done, after all.” He knocked back the rest of his coffee, then moved to stand, with Yokozawa following to see him off.

“Thanks for driving me back; take care heading home.”

Kirishima shifted around after slipping on his shoes, turning a frown to Yokozawa. “C’mon, this is the part where you say *have a good day, Dear*.”

“As if I’m gonna go along with every hair-brained scheme you come up with.”

“Hurry up now; it’s, ‘*have a good day, Dear*’.” He lightly tapped his cheek, leaning in.

“No way.” He wasn’t going to be caught *dead* doing such a lovey-dovey couple thing, *Maybe* he could’ve done it if he’d been the type to

remotely *enjoy* doing such cutesy things, but it just didn't suit him in the least.

"C'mon, what's it gonna hurt? No Hiyo around right now."

"Because I don't understand the *point*."

"And I can't understand why you *won't* do it."

"Be that as it may, I'm *not*." If he gave in to every little thing Kirishima begged him for, he'd just wind up wrapped around the guy's little finger.

But his fervent objections only made Kirishima change tacks: "All right, I *was* gonna let you off with a peck on the cheeks—but not now."

"What the hell're you—" He quickly found himself shoved against the wall, with his protesting lips smoothly sealed with a kiss. Shocked at the bold maneuver, he allowed Kirishima's tongue to slip in unopposed. "Nnn-ngh...!"



Yokozawa reflected distantly that his armor really *must* be full of chinks to be so easily manipulated like this. A shudder rippled down his spine at the slick, wet sensation of their tongues sliding together, and something at his core throbbed sharply. Try as he might to keep quiet,

though, his mouth was currently at the mercy of another, leaving him unable to bite back any sounds.

He groped frantically for the more reasonable side of him being washed away in the wake of the expert kiss—compared to this, Iokawa's kiss had been little more than a brush of skin, a repulsive sensation he might have likened to accidentally sliding up against a stranger's sweat-slicked skin in the height of summer.

Such thoughts brought to mind just how *strange* senses were; the actions themselves were the same, but just by changing the emotions involved, the sensation itself shifted drastically.

"Hnn...nnmm..." The strength in the arms wrapped tight around his waist, the thick solidity of their chests brushing together, and the scent of Kirishima himself mingling with that of the product in his hair...Yokozawa was surrounded inside and out with *Kirishima*.

"Nn-ngh-!!" Kirishima knocked Yokozawa's knees apart with his own, brushing a thigh against his groin—and his cock, already half-hard, stiffened further beneath the gentle thrusting. The arms that had been wrapped snugly about his waist dipped lower, massaging his ass.

He'd nearly lost himself to negligence here—but if this kept up, Kirishima would just have his way with him. Swallowing a choked groan, he poured what was left of his strength into pushing Kirishima away bodily.

"...*Fuck*, you're relentless... Ease up." He turned his head to the side and wiped at his glistening lips with the back of his hand—every point where they'd touched throbbed incessantly.

"Says the guy who nearly slipped to his knees because he's so turned on..."

"!!" While whether or not he'd been turned on should have nothing to do with his grounds for pushing Kirishima away, to say as such would likely sound like little more than an excuse.

But as he stood there, silent and flushed, Kirishima leaned close to whisper in his ear, "You think I look hot, don't you?"

"...Th—I never...!" Deny it all he might, though, more unsettling was the realization that Kirishima had *noticed* all of those subtle glances Yokozawa had been throwing his way.

Kirishima simply grinned widely, as if reading Yokozawa's thoughts. "Can't say I blame you—you just can't help getting caught up in my dashing good looks, right?"

"How-?!" He unwittingly opened his mouth to ask how he'd known—but quickly covered it with his hand to keep from spilling. He'd barely managed to keep from walking into that trap—but in truth, he was already a lost cause.

"See? Bull's-eye, right?"

"Wh—who the hell would..." Despite his efforts at denial, though, he could feel his face flushing with heat; he'd never learned the art of willing the blood from rushing to his head.

"You stubborn idiot—though I must confess it's one of the things I find most endearing about you."

"Gya-!" he yelped in pathetic response as Kirishima nibbled on his earlobe.

"*Fuck* you sure know how to kill the mood," Kirishima snickered, laving a stripe down Yokozawa's flushed neck.

"If you've—ngh...got a problem with the *mood* then don't start shit...!"

"Where did I say I had a *problem* with it? It's a compliment."

"How...the hell was that...a compli..." He got no further, though, as Kirishima's broad hands slipped over his hips and ass, massaging them suggestively. He couldn't fathom what this man found enjoyable about touching such a hard, stiff body—but Kirishima never let up, continuing to reach out and make a move at every opportunity.

Maybe more than deriving any real pleasure from touching, he just liked seeing how Yokozawa reacted to the situation. He always seemed happier the more Yokozawa squirmed, after all.

"Shall I be a bit more direct, then?"

"*No thanks.*" If he retorted with something like *Just try it*, he'd only be digging his own grave. They unfortunately weren't embarrassed by the same things, so Kirishima would likely have no difficulty at all in spouting a few sickeningly sweet nothings.

"And the way you're so vehemently *contrary* is yet another thing about you I find endearing."

“There is *seriously* something wrong with your eyes...” Or if that wasn’t the case, his taste was *disturbingly* off, and while he’d grown kind of used to the comments after enduring so many professions of *adorable* and *endearing* and *cute*, he still couldn’t concur. He’d actually tried looking himself over in the mirror a few times, but even from an objective point of view, he couldn’t see himself as anything someone might term *cute*. If anything, he was *intimidating*.

“You think? Well I suppose that’s why they say love is blind and beauty being in the eye of the beholder and all that.”

“Whatever.” He’d learned to cope with Kirishima’s seamlessly delivered sweet nothings, and while he still had a tendency to be caught off guard, he’d finally managed to let most of the comments roll off his back.

“So how much work do you have piling up?”

“Huh? ...It’s not really ‘piling up’, I guess...” He had some things on his plate, but nothing that demanded his immediate and full-focused attention without a moment to spare. When his gaze waxed confused, not entirely understanding the change in subject, Kirishima came to his own conclusion.

“Then you can spare an hour, huh.”

“Wha—wait, what’re you taking your shoes off again for?!” he snapped as Kirishima began to toe off the loafers he’d just slipped on.

“Because I can’t exactly walk into your bedroom with them on?”

“But—Hiyo’s waiting for you!”

“And I told you she’s doing homework with a friend—or did you forget?”

“I...uh...”

“C’mon—put a little more thought into your protests, won’t you? Though if you’re absolutely *adamant* that we not do it, I suppose I can rein it in for today...for your sake.”

“The fuck do you get off acting all high and mighty?” he retorted, appalled at the condescension laced in Kirishima’s words.

“...Just born that way, I guess?”

A rush of irritation welled up at the way Kirishima cocked his head in innocent deliberation here, likely assuming he could get away with what he’d said through an endearing gesture.

But flying off the handle here would be playing right into Kirishima's hand—so Yokozawa instead took a deep breath to calm himself.

"I must apologize, sir—but the deadline for issuing claims of grievance has passed, and we're no longer accepting any debate."

"Wha—hey, wait—!" The notion of a 'deadline' was a joke—he'd hardly been given a moment to think.

But Kirishima just snaked a hand out to grip his hip tightly, guiding him forcibly towards the bedroom. It seemed regardless of whether he reacted out of instinct or took the time to consider things, the outcome was always the same.

"We *are* open to requests, though..."

"*No thanks*," he snarled, but Kirishima was unmoved, and whether he liked it or not, it seemed he was headed for his bedroom.

"Haa..."

With the curtains drawn, a pair of labored, breathy voices and slick, viscous sounds echoed around the room, and while Yokozawa couldn't stand being spoken to in times like this, this still silence was just as uncomfortable.

"En...enough..."

"The hell it is—you're still tight; surely you can tell." Kirishima scissored his lotion-slicked fingers, gently stroking Yokozawa from the inside.

His bedroom was stocked now with things Kirishima had brought in over the months—including the gel and condoms currently lying atop the sheets. He'd just carried them in one day out of the blue, riffling around in Yokozawa's bedside drawer and storing them there without even asking. Granted, Yokozawa hadn't really been *using* the drawer, so he'd hardly been troubled, but he just couldn't settle down knowing *those* kinds of things were sitting there so near at hand. He'd thought about throwing them out, but after grudgingly accepting that they'd likely wind up using them eventually, he'd given up. They never would have made it this far in their relationship if Yokozawa scolded him over every little thing like this, after all.

“Ha...ngh...!” Face-down on the bed, Yokozawa felt dizzy with thoughts of the fingers stroking within him—how long they were...how thick. But at the rate Kirishima was going, brushing relentlessly at the same spot over and over, he was certain he was going to spill any moment. “St—op...with the same...spot...”

“I’m doing it on *purpose*, you idiot. Now just sit back and enjoy.”

“Nn—ah—!” A violent shudder rippled down his spine as Kirishima gave a particularly sharp jab—an action that might have pushed him over the edge had he not been jerked back by a warm palm gripping his cock tight, denying him release.

“Nuh uh, don’t you dare come first...”

“Then...stop beating around the fucking bush about it...!” He was pressed for breath but still managed to snap the retort with his characteristic brusqueness.

Kirishima merely chuckled at this demand. “So can I take that to mean you *want me*? I do apologize for not realizing...”

“Tha—t’s not what...” If he was going to endure such teasing, he simply wanted to hurry and get this over with, even if it meant having to put up with a little pain. But if he’d said so, it would’ve just sounded like he was begging for it.

“You know, you’re allowed to beg me cutely now and then.”

“As if!”

“Not that your stubborn streak isn’t cute in its own way. Here, lift your hips a bit more.” He punctuated the request with a light slap to Yokozawa’s ass. If they got into an argument now, this would never end, so giving in for the time being, Yokozawa assumed what he felt was a most disgraceful position.

He could sense Kirishima slipping on a condom behind him; it was embarrassing, in a way—how strangely calm he could be doing so in the midst of such passion.

“...All right, there’s a good boy. Now don’t tense up.”

“Nn...ngh...”

The tip of the shaft breached him, and despite being well and thoroughly prepared beforehand, his limbs shuddered sharply at the sensation of Kirishima’s thick, hot cock sliding in slowly but surely.

If pressed, Yokozawa would have to say that he really didn't like this position—with Kirishima pushing into him from behind. While it was admittedly more comfortable than having his legs forcefully spread apart, the shame he felt at being taken from behind with no say in the matter was unbearable.

He was still struck with disbelief that he'd wound up in this position, at Kirishima's mercy like this, in the first place—and likely the only reason he put up with it all despite the overwhelming feelings of shame...was because it was *Kirishima*.

He probably would never have been able to bear it if anyone else had seen him in such a disgraceful position. Not that he was really 'bearing it' all that effectively now—and he forcibly distracted himself from imagining the ridiculous sight he was presenting just now.

"Fuck, you're as tight as ever..."

"No, your dick's just *fucking huge*..."

"Maybe—but you *like it*."

"When the hell did I say that?!" He would *definitely* have remembered saying something so frankly honest, and no matter how lost in ecstasy he might have been, he was quite certain there was no way he'd *ever* say something like that.

"You never said so—but I still understood it."

"The hell? I don't get you at all..."

"Or would you rather I just say *Well your body's a lot more honest* instead? Also, you *really* ought to consider the delicate position you're in before bitching at me."

The fingers of his outstretched hand wrapped expertly around Yokozawa's cock, and Yokozawa bit back a moan at the sensation of those fingers, slick with precum, gently stroking the cockhead and brushing lightly over the tip.

Despite the intense pleasure of the attentions, Kirishima's tight grip kept him from achieving release, and as Yokozawa struggled to cope in the face of such frustration, Kirishima delivered a punching thrust.

"AH—!" His yelp sprang free at the sharp thrust, and Kirishima huffed in satisfaction from behind, buried to the hilt as he was now. Yokozawa's whole body throbbed in time with his pulse,

synchronizing with the second thudding pulse he could feel echoing from within and fanning the flames of passion all the higher.

“Someone let his guard down...”

“Shut...the hell up...”

“Now now, pretty words like that just make me want to tease you all the more mercilessly...”

“The...hell are you...sayi-ngh!”

Kirishima grabbed him by the hips and drilled in deep, his subtle shift in angle sending his cock brushing teasingly against Yokozawa’s inner walls. Pleasure rushed through him, filling him with a pleasant numbness from stem to stern.

“Aah, ha-...” He could no longer hope to contain his voice in the wake of Kirishima’s relentless thrusts now, pounding into him over and over. He pulled out further and pressed in deeper with each pass, dragging his cock over Yokozawa’s sensitive inner walls and setting his sight to flashing with brilliant pops of light.

Every muscle in his body spasmed, and a sheen of sweat pooled over his skin to leave tracks where it dripped to the sheets. His cockhead glistened with precum, and at another challenging squeeze from Kirishima, it stiffened even further. “Hnng...!”

It was, without a doubt, sheer *ecstasy*—but the line between overwhelming pleasure and pain was thinner than a hair’s breadth. He craved release, but he couldn’t make it over that final hurdle, as Kirishima kept slackening his grip just at the last moment.

The man *loved* to tease—and every time he pressed the short-tempered Yokozawa *just* far enough, *right* before he got really pissed, he’d paste on that self-satisfied grin of his. It was times like that that Yokozawa *loathed* him, but while he always vowed he’d get back at Kirishima one of these days, he had yet to be blessed with such an opportunity.

“En-ough...al...ready...ngh—”

“Come on...you know better than that. What do we say when we want to cum...?” He couldn’t see Kirishima’s face right now, given their positions, but he was undoubtedly wearing a shit-eating grin right now. He’d challenged Yokozawa to beg ‘cutely’ before...but

would it really hurt the guy to *look* at who he was asking such things from before speaking?

It was clear, though, that if he griped about it now, Kirishima would continue to tease, so he reminded himself that all he needed to do to end this torture was to say something sure to please Kirishima—in content, if not in tone.

“Whatever, just...let me cum already...”

Kirishima seemed satisfied with the half-hearted request. “As you wish~” And with that, he increased the temp of his thrusts—immediately setting a buzzing haze over Yokozawa’s mind. All thought and sense was ripped from him with the rising pleasure, and he fought to keep his breathing under control as all conscious thought was ripped to shreds.

He *hated* not being able to see his partner right now—but it had the advantage of at least keeping Kirishima from seeing his utterly debased expression. “Ah—ah...AH!”



He reached his peak as if violently urged there—and finally found blessed release. As he coated the sheets beneath them with pearly drops of white, his body clamped down tight on the cock buried deep within him, and only moments later, he felt Kirishima inhale sharply—before his length swelled. “.....!!”

He spilled within, finding his own release, and after a moment, his breathing returned and he let out a deep sigh. Yokozawa's body was still numb in the wake of his climax, but he distantly sensed Kirishima's cock slip free. They both flopped to their backs on the bed, breath coming out in frantic pants.

Both limbs and thoughts fell limp by the wayside in a post-coital haze, and while notions like *Fuck I need to shower now* or *I still have so much work to do* flitted through his head, Yokozawa couldn't bring himself to lift a finger just yet.

"...Shit I'm tired now."

"...And whose fault is *that*?" He *hardly* wanted to be hearing such complaints from the very man responsible for teasing him and unnecessarily taking up time.

"Yours, for *seducing* me."

"I did no such thing!" Yokozawa snapped back, appalled at the way Kirishima so easily passed the blame. Even for a joke, it wasn't that funny.

"No, you totally did. Good grief, it's *really* bad form for you not to realize it by now, you know?"

"Ugh, you..." Even if he *did* deserve blame for not realizing what he'd done, Kirishima was far worse for taking advantage of it. Despite understanding fully well just how Yokozawa would react in such situations, he still went out of his way to tick Yokozawa off.

"Ooh yeah, that pissed-off face of yours is *crazy* hot."

"Save talking in your sleep for *after* you go to bed." Was the man's head filled with *flowers* or something? It was getting ridiculous interacting with him now.

He shifted his lethargic body upright and glanced around for something to wear. Thankfully, his pants had fallen right beside the bed, and he quickly slipped them on, standing again.

He'd come back to do some *work*; he couldn't sit around all afternoon wasting time like this.

"Hey—where're you going?"

"To take a shower," he answered, fighting the urge to snap *Where do you think I'm going?*

“C’mon, it wouldn’t hurt you to enjoy this post-coital bliss a little longer. Enjoying a nice cuddle after sex is important, you know.”

“Stuff it. Besides, you screwed up the mood first.” Who did he think was the one who’d started babbling stupid shit? He scooped up a shirt and tossed it in Kirishima’s face, receiving a light snort of laughter in response.

“Fiiiiine, guess I’ll get ready to head back, then.”

“What the—why are you coming with me?!” he squawked as Kirishima slipped on his own pants and headed from the room close on Yokozawa’s heels.

“You can’t very well expect me to go home reeking of sweat, can you?”

“I’ll be right out—so just wait your turn!”

“C’mon, don’t throw a fit; what’s the harm?” He threw an arm around Yokozawa’s shoulders and squeezed, leaving Yokozawa bereft of any energy to fight.

“I *really* wish you’d get a clue sometimes...” Kirishima never listened to him when he protested anyway, so today was looking to be yet another day where all he could do was sigh, slump his shoulders, and take what was coming.

“Today sure was a long one, wasn’t it?” Henmi muttered next to Yokozawa, clearly exhausted as he finished organizing the materials before him.

“Well there were a lot of publications to sort through; but damn, they sure did put up a nasty fight...” It was hardly rare for print-run decision meetings with the comics teams to erupt in arguments, but this meeting had been particularly rough.

He could understand their hesitation at offering overly ambitious numbers, thanks to a slump in the market, but they’d never get *anywhere* with the creators themselves shirking their duty. They’d wanted to tighten the first print run—and if sales proved promising, call for another.

But while that was the safer route, certainly, it also meant the very real possibility of lost sales in the time between the first run selling out

and the second hitting the shelves. There was never a more harrowing position for a salesman to be in than *this*.

"I'm starving—but ugh, no time to go out for lunch..." He'd missed his chance. Representatives from the bookstores were due to come in shortly for a meeting about the fair, so he couldn't spare the time to step out for a bite.

He'd managed to keep his calorie intake up through nutritional snacks he kept close at hand, but it didn't manage to soothe his hunger pangs. He really ought to have picked up something before coming in to work.

"Would you like me to pick up a bentou on my way back? Though I don't expect to make it back to the office before 3..." Henmi was about to head out for a meeting with a bookstore. They were calling on a fair number of shops to help out with the fair this year, so they were dividing up the workload.

"You don't mind? I'm fine with pretty much anything." Yokozawa pulled out his wallet and handed over the fee for the boxed lunch. He didn't expect he'd make it out of the office before the evening, so even if Henmi took a while, it was still a load off his shoulders to have someone else step out and pick up something to eat.

"Roger! I'll try to make it back as quickly as I can." With a final glance over his materials, Henmi stuffed the documents into his bag—before pausing as if remembering something. "Oh—Yokozawa-san, are you free this evening?"

He didn't have any plans with Kirishima this evening, having used the excuse of *Well I'll probably have to work overtime* to cover up the fact that, in truth, he kind of wanted some time alone to think.

"It's nothing serious, but I had something I kind of wanted to consult with you on..."

"Then how about we grab a bite to eat together later?" He'd initially planned on heading straight back to his apartment, but he could hardly turn down a subordinate looking for advice. Henmi had been doubling down on his workload lately, clearly working hard—so he'd more than earned the chance to be treated to a meal by a superior. "But—only *after* you get your work done."

“Yes yes, I know. Well, I’m off then!” He quickly gathered his belongings and exited the sales floor.

Yokozawa watched him leave for a moment before turning back to his own work, facing his laptop once more. He opened the file of data for his own meeting and sent it off to the printer, pausing to check over some materials used in previous fairs for reference while he waited for the sheets to print.

Slicing open a cardboard box that seemed to have been tucked away in the wake of Marukawa’s recent move, he found it filled with all sorts of materials. Postcards and posters were to be expected, but he also found register display art and life-size standees folded up within.

There were quite a few samples of potential prizes for readers as well, including stationery pieces like clear files, notepads, and pens as well as drama CDs, wall clocks, and no small number of t-shirts, pillow cases, and hand towels.

Some prizes also seemed to give the recipient the opportunity to take part in an autograph session with an author or a talk event—it was clear that managing editors over the years had poured their experience into these events.

The bigger this event got, the more they absolutely needed the cooperation of the bookstores. This year, it wasn’t just Marukawa making all of the requests but rather a conversation, with both sides making suggestions for the other to consider, all in an effort to put together a program sure to please readers.

Conversing directly enabled them to determine exactly what was needed to pull this off, what the shops were looking for. As such, Yokozawa was making every effort to hit up the shops in person—but there were a *lot*.

He was putting all of the knowledge and connections he’d developed over the years to work now. Relationships were *important* here. He’d strangely enough had as much contact in the past with fellow salesman as with bookstore employees and could recall the many nights they’d gone out drinking until down.

But he’d lost contact with them lately—due in large part to responsibilities increasing with age and the general rush of everyday

life. The only person in his line of business he'd conversed with of late had been...Iokawa.

"....."

The name brought to mind thoughts of the previous day's events. He'd unconsciously avoided thinking about the man, but he couldn't keep running away from it forever. He had a responsibility to face this head-on.

Except, setting aside the trouble with getting trapped inside the elevator, Iokawa's confession had been a dark cloud in an otherwise clear sky. He'd seemed like such a nice, gentle fellow—Yokozawa never would have expected him to say the sorts of things he had. Perhaps he'd picked up that persistent nature in his years as a salesman.

Yokozawa knew he would have to track him down and clearly explain that he could not return Iokawa's feelings, but it drained him just *thinking* about it.

And to make matters worse, that wasn't the only thing weighing on Yokozawa just at the moment; he was also preoccupied with what Iokawa had said—

"Do you actually think you'll be able to be with Kirishima-san so openly once she starts to get older?"

He hadn't been able to offer an immediate response to the question—what had rattled him most, though, had been how cleanly Iokawa had cut through to Yokozawa's own latent worries.

When he thought about it—about *Hiyori*...he couldn't honestly imagine that they'd be able to continue their relationship as it was forever. He probably ought to start now by reducing the amount of time he spent at their apartment—but he just couldn't figure out how to go about doing that.

If he just stopped going altogether out of the blue, he'd probably just worry Hiyori unnecessarily—and Sorata had finally gotten used to his new living arrangements, so if Yokozawa had to drag him away from it all, he might hit another slump.

Taking things in baby steps was probably the best course of action, but he didn't think himself skilled enough to make it work. However—whether these worries were born out of genuine concern or

a trumped up excuse on his part to put off the inevitable...he couldn't tell. The more he thought about it, the heavier reality became.

Humans were extravagant creatures, loath to abandon happiness once they'd gotten a taste.

"Yokozawa-san—your print job is finished...?"

"Oh—sorry," he muttered quickly, taking the printouts his coworker had brought over. Now wasn't the time to be getting lost in thought, and after pushing his personal problems to a corner of his mind, he returned his focus to the task at hand.

After finishing up his meeting, Yokozawa stepped out to see off the bookstore representatives. Despite the calendar reading October, the remaining vestiges of the hot summer sun continued unabated.

"Thanks very much for all your hard work today. We've still got quite a bit of work ahead of us, but I hope I can count on your continued support in this endeavor."

"The pleasure was all ours. I hope we can make this campaign successful."

"Indeed. Thank you again for your cooperation." He dipped a final bow of his head. Today's meeting had been between Yokozawa and representatives from the various large chain bookstores. The fact that they'd been close in age to Yokozawa and had a friendly demeanor had helped the meeting to go even more smoothly than he'd expected, and as they disappeared through the turnstiles at the station, Yokozawa tugged his tie loose and released a long sigh of relief.

"...Man, I'm beat..." he muttered to himself before turning on his heel to head back to the office. His shoulders were stiff from meeting upon meeting, and with all of the talking he'd had to do today, he was feeling quite parched. He decided to drop by the break room before heading back to his desk, just for a few moments' peace.

As he stretched in a corner of the room where no one would spot him, his joints creaked noisily, evidence of how stiff his muscles were. He really *wasn't* suited for just sitting around all day, he was reminded. He used the change rattling about in his pockets to purchase something carbonated, then settled down on one of the benches. Taking a long

draw on his drink, he felt his body's moisture being replenished immediately.

Preparations for the upcoming book fair were moving along smoothly, and coming up next, he had a meeting with a representative from the Literature department—he'd worked hard putting together a plan to convince them to throw their support behind the campaign's efforts, given how loath they'd been to do so thus far.

While he relaxed, his phone continued to buzz with messages clamoring for his confirmation on various matters. He hadn't yet had a chance to respond to any of the ones that had come during his earlier meeting, either.

For the time being, he typed out responses to the most urgent messages, delivering his confirmation. A coworker had also texted asking him when he would be returning, but he hoped he could be spared at least another 10 minutes. He let them know where he was and then slipped his phone back into his pocket.

When it came to the workplace, if he did his job properly, he'd eventually reach the goal—and any potholes could be overcome through trial and error. But things weren't so easy in his private life.

The problem itself was a simple one: when to cut things off. If he could just take that step, if he could just get it over with... But it was difficult, forcing his emotions to accept that things were how they were.

If resolving this issue were that simple, though, he wouldn't be sitting here worrying so much about it in the first place. He'd never stopped to consider that being in a relationship with another man could cause so much grief. Or well—that wasn't *entirely* true, but finally standing in the center of such a storm himself had made the consequences really hit home.

"I wonder...what *he's* planning on doing..."

At this, Takano's image rose in his mind. He was also currently in a same-sex relationship—with someone he'd pined after for a long, *long* time, and Yokozawa wondered distantly what he thought about their 'future' together.

"...He probably wouldn't work himself into a frenzy over it like me..." While years before, Takano might have brooded over the

situation and grown depressed, he had clearly evolved into the type to take action rather than sit and stew.

Despite his nickname as a 'wild bear', Yokozawa had always been one to look for an exit strategy whenever it came to matters concerning himself. The energetic assertiveness he showed on a daily basis was little more than a thin shell of a mask, hiding how much of a *coward* he truly was.

And it was probably all thanks to Kirishima...that he'd stopped trying to ignore that part of himself. Precisely because there was now someone out there who was set on accepting him for all that he was, the good and the bad, Yokozawa had finally found the courage to face that side of himself.

"....."

But the problem he was facing right now was not his alone; continuing to hide their relationship was tantamount to continuing to live a lie. Kirishima would likely be approached with the offer of remarrying many more times in the future, and there was always the chance that the day would come when Hiyori would start to realize how strange it was for Yokozawa to be around so much. How would he react when that time came? How would she feel about it?

Sure, she *might* accept him. But—it was *far* more likely that she'd instead be hurt by the revelation, and he didn't want to do *anything* that might cause her pain.

But putting space between himself and Hiyori...would mean putting space between himself and Kirishima as well.

It would be easy enough to take his leave if not doing so would mean shattering their happiness, but the issue would be trying to get Kirishima to see things that way. He most definitely didn't strike Yokozawa as the type to sit back and accept things he didn't agree with.

But Hiyori was the most important person to Kirishima, so he'd eventually bring himself to agree with Yokozawa's choice. Even someone like Kirishima would have to see there was no other option.

"Ugh..." He'd been mentally debating this issue over and over since the day before, but he felt like he just kept coming to the same conclusion. Which meant that the only thing left stalling him...was

deciding when and how to break the news. This had *always* been something he'd been bad at; romance and relationships had never been his forte.

"You look rough."

"Ki-Kirishima-san?!"

"What? You look like you've just seen a ghost."

Of course he did; there was no way he could keep a steady head when the very person he'd just been wracking his mind over bent down to peer into his face. Startled by the unexpected voice speaking from just over his head, he'd nearly dropped the paper cup in his hand. He'd apparently finished his beverage while spacing out, though, so at least he hadn't spilled the contents.

"What are you doing here...?"

"I went down to the sales floor and they said you were here, so I graced you with my presence. Here, a snack."

"Huh?"

"You said you didn't have time to eat, right?" Kirishima held out a paper bag, its side emblazoned with the logo of a local bakery. He vaguely recalled mumbling something along those lines the day before, but he never would have expected Kirishima to remember it.

Peeking into the bag, he found a cutlet sandwich oozing with a sauce that smelled delicious but tickled his nostrils. "Wait, did you...go out and buy this for me?"

"Damn straight. I figured I ought to rack up points with you while I had the chance."

"Idiot," he snorted softly. After all their time together, now was hardly the time to start worrying about scoring points, but he still chuckled at the thought.

The corners of Kirishima's lips quirked upward. "Not that I don't think you look great when you're in serious mode—but I gotta admit, you're way more adorable when you smile."

"...Y-you don't have to go out of your way to point out shit like that all the time!" This was hardly something new from Kirishima, but he *really* wished the guy would stop describing him with such inappropriate words.

"Well it's how I really feel, so can you blame me?"

"There's still no need for you to *say it out loud*."

"Unlike *some* people, I'm a chatterbox." He didn't seem the least bit penitent. He probably didn't believe he'd done anything remotely wrong. And while most would see complimenting someone else as doing something *good*, Yokozawa only saw it as an attempt to ruffle his feathers. Being exposed to compliments he wasn't used to hearing always left Yokozawa feeling embarrassed.

And Kirishima probably knew it. "...Good grief..." That was why he was always saying them point blank to Yokozawa's face. He knew all he had to do was just *get used* to the words, but if that were possible, Yokozawa wouldn't be in the position he was.

"What'll you have to drink?" Kirishima queried, pulling out some change and apparently fully intending on treating Yokozawa to a beverage as well.

"I just had something—so I'm fine."

"You sure?" He bought himself a can of coffee, then settled down onto the bench beside Yokozawa. Despite there being plenty of room, though, he scooted up right against Yokozawa, their shoulders bumping, and left Yokozawa feeling rather uptight for the closeness. "Aren't you gonna eat?"

"It's...hard to eat with you *staring* like that..."

"Think of it as my tip and just *deal with it*."

"What the hell..." He eventually gave up trying to wiggle out from under Kirishima's gaze and reached for the sandwich. It'd been so long since he'd last eaten, he'd half-forgotten he was even hungry in the first place, but the moment he clapped eyes on the thick cutlet strip, he felt his mouth begin to water. He took a large bite of the sandwich, a thick strip of meat coated in crispy fried breading and surrounded by slices of bread with a wonderful consistency. The meat itself was juicy and tender, with a slightly sweet sauce that complimented it perfectly, and the thinly sliced cabbage was fresh and delicious. "...This is really good." He finished off one of the sandwiches in a flash—confident he could have handled half a dozen.

"Right?? This place's sandwiches are all delicious—and pretty sizeable for the price, too, which is nice."

Yokozawa had passed in front of this bakery often but had balked at entering, seeing how popular it was with female customers and the rather ‘cute’ aesthetic to the shop’s interior. Maybe he’d held off going because he’d always thought lunch should be taken somewhere that didn’t leave him with an unsettled stomach.

“So...you go to that kind of place often?”

“I started dropping by after someone treated me to a meal.”

“...Oh, I see.” It had probably been a gift from a female coworker; Yokozawa often caught sight of Kirishima receiving such things under the pretense of souvenirs or ‘leftovers’. He’d even go so far as to say it seemed to be happening *more* often of late. Kirishima handled them all magnificently though, from those with idle, fleeting interest to the few who actually seemed to be seriously gunning for him—and it was likely that charm that had earned him the title of ‘charismatic editor-in-chief’.

“That reminds me—have you turned down that guy from yesterday yet?”

“.....-!!” At the unexpected comment, Yokozawa nearly choked on the cutlet sandwich, clapping his chest to force it down.

“Hey—you okay? Here, drink this.” He took the proffered can of coffee and washed the sandwich down his throat, finally managing to calm down again. “Geez, be careful with your food. You’re not old enough yet that you should have to worry about things going down the wrong pipe.”

“That was because *you* brought up something ridiculous while I was eating!”

“I have a right to know.”

“.....” Be that as it may, it wouldn’t have hurt Kirishima to think about the *timing*. ‘That guy from yesterday’ was, of course, in reference to Iokawa’s confession, and while Yokozawa could understand his concern, it wasn’t something that could be resolved by a good night’s rest.

“...So?”

“...You do realize that *today* being only the day *after* yesterday means I’ve hardly had any time to *do* anything, right?” After Kirishima had left the previous afternoon, he’d been buried under proposals and their associated materials. He’d worked long into the night and then

woken up early in the morning to head straight in to work—so of *course* he hadn't had time to take care of the matter.

On top of that, any time he found himself with a moment's peace to really *think*, it had turned into consideration of how to handle Kirishima and Hiyori. The pair had melded seamlessly into Yokozawa's concept of *normalcy* by now, more so than he'd ever expected them to. Anytime he ate something delicious, he would find himself thinking that he wanted the pair to share it with him, or if something interesting happened, he couldn't wait to let them know about it.

"If all you're doing is pressing home your point, why not just send him a text?"

"You know I can't do *that*." He might have liked to, if he'd thought it was the kind of matter that could be settled with an e-mail or text message, but it would be downright rude to do so in this case. It took balls to tell someone you had feelings for them—and just because Yokozawa couldn't return those feelings didn't make it okay to treat the matter frivolously. Iokawa deserved the same amount of courage in return.

"...You sure do take things frustratingly seriously sometimes."

"Well excuse me for being *shitty* at dealing with people." He often found himself wishing he could be as adept at these kinds of things as Kirishima, but that was laughably impossible. He knew just how awkward he could be at times, so he was left with little choice but to charge forward and hope everything worked out for the best. Kirishima always gave off an air of wandering about aimlessly, but he rarely showed any chinks in his armor where someone could slip in and deliver a confession he'd be forced to turn down.

And that was largely because he was infuriatingly *sharp* and extremely quick-witted and tactful. The way he could manipulate the mood of a room was built upon careful calculation—and it utterly amazed Yokozawa. Unlike him, Kirishima hardly ever had to raise his voice, and whenever he needed to reprimand his subordinates, he always did so in a manner which forced them to engage in self-reflection. As such, while he was a force to be reckoned with when *really* pissed off, the difference between those times and his normal demeanor became his true weapon.

“C’mon, don’t get pissed—I was giving you a *compliment*. I’m saying that’s one of the things I love about you.”

“O...Oh...” He hadn’t noticed the comment had been meant as praise, and at the sight of Yokozawa fumbling for a response, Kirishima slapped him sharply on the back.

“The way you’re super serious and don’t have any ulterior motives is one of your good points. Don’t *apologize* for it—be proud of it!” It seemed he was trying to cheer Yokozawa up. Maybe he’d misunderstood why Yokozawa had seemed to be in a sour mood, convinced he was only worrying about the matter with Iokawa.

“.....” He considered the merits of correcting the misconception for a moment—before ultimately deciding it would be best to keep quiet for the time being. They would have to face this problem eventually, but it didn’t have to be *now*.

In an effort to disguise the fact that he was clearly trying *not* to discuss something, he brought a third sandwich to his lips, and as he chewed, taking the time to savor the flavor, Henmi poked his head into the break room.

“Ah, Yokozawa-san! I’m sorry for being so late in returning! I’ve brought you a bentou—wait, huh?”

“Hey there; you here for a break too?” Kirishima called out in place of Yokozawa, whose mouth was still full.

“Oh—excuse me! I didn’t realize you’d be here too, Kirishima-san!” Henmi apologized, realizing his tone had been a bit inappropriate considering Yokozawa wasn’t alone.



“What’re you apologizing for? You’re not *afraid* of me, are you?”

“Maybe—you people *do* put the screws to us down in sales pretty often...”

"It's—not a matter of being afraid..." Henmi scrambled to explain when Yokozawa joined the conversation after finishing his sandwich. Despite his claims of jealousy that Yokozawa got to go out drinking with Kirishima, it seemed Henmi lost his nerve when faced with the man himself.

Kirishima came off affable and generous, but he could also be a bit difficult to approach, and it seemed Henmi had picked up on that. Perhaps it was precisely *because* he looked up to Kirishima that Henmi couldn't keep calm around him.

"Well don't just stand there—have a seat."

"Oh, no! I couldn't! I just came to deliver this...but, am I perhaps too late?" Spotting the empty paper bag from the bakery, Henmi—plastic bag with a bentou hanging from one hand—let a disappointed expression pass over his features.

"Huh? You mean you asked Henmi to pick you up some lunch? You should've said so sooner."

"I didn't have *time* to." He hadn't *forgotten* he'd asked Henmi to grab lunch for him; he'd simply planned to eat the bentou later.

"What should I do with this then...?" Henmi glanced at the bentou bag, perplexed, at a loss for where to go from here.

"What do you mean? I'm gonna eat it, of course."

"You really don't have to force yourself, though...?"

"I'm starving here. I feel like I could eat a dozen bentous right now." He'd made sure to have breakfast before commuting to work, but that had been quite early this morning, so his stomach was well and truly empty by now. The cutlet sandwiches seemed to have only whet his appetite, and his body was already clamoring for something more filling.

He relieved Henmi of the bentou and broke the chopsticks. As he lifted the lid, Kirishima crumpled up the empty coffee cup he'd just finished drinking and tossed it at the garbage pail, where it painted a lovely arc before plopping neatly into the can.

"Well, I'm gonna go ahead and head back."

"Eh? Oh—I'll be taking my leave, so please rest a bit longer, Kirishima-san!" Henmi urged, but Kirishima stood abruptly.

"I'd love to, but I'm afraid I've got a job to do. Need to finish up preparations for that campaign, after all. Oh right—I mailed you the designs for the sales promotion goods, so be sure to check them out later."

"Got it."

"Oh—and what time do you get off today, Yokozawa?" Kirishima called back, pausing just before exiting the room.

Realizing Kirishima was likely hoping to invite him out for drinks, he delivered his rejection before hearing any further details: "Ah—sorry, I've got a previous engagement tonight."

"...I see, guess I'll catch you some other time." And without further protest, Kirishima took his leave. The pause he'd taken before responding was a bit concerning, but he'd likely just been worried about Henmi's presence.

"Umm, was that 'previous engagement' you just mentioned...possibly me? Are you sure about that? Turning down Kirishima-san's invitation..."

"You're the one who said you needed to talk about something!"

"Well, yes, but..." He glanced in the direction Kirishima had just left, expression regretful.

"...It's fine. Turning him down once won't hurt anything. He has to cancel on me at the last minute all the time for work, after all. Plus—showing my subordinates a better side now and then isn't such a bad thing."

"Yokozawa-san...!" Henmi gazed up at him with an awed expression, and Yokozawa felt something clench in his chest. He *had* felt the need to prioritize this previous engagement, yes...but he'd also kind of used it as an excuse to turn Kirishima down.

The workplace was a given, but he also still didn't want to be left alone with Kirishima in their off hours just yet either. When faced with the man, Yokozawa feared Kirishima could see into his soul. He'd managed to put him off earlier thanks to Kirishima's misunderstanding, but if he'd probed just a little deeper, Yokozawa didn't doubt he'd root out the issue.

At least until he worked things out, he wanted to have some time alone to really think things through. When they were together, it felt

far too *good*, too *comfortable*, and he wound up letting himself rely too much on Kirishima.

“.....” He released a soft sigh, hoping Henmi wouldn’t notice.

“I’m sorry...it’s really nothing all that important...”

“Something to do with work?”

“It seems I haven’t met with the representative from Seirin Shoten yet, so things aren’t progressing all that smoothly with them. You were in charge of that shop before, right? They might not approve of how I handle the job...”

Henmi, with his energy and upbeat attitude known as his redeeming feature, let his shoulders slump. It was hardly rare to feel depressed at the knowledge that you just weren’t good enough—it was a feeling Yokozawa was more than familiar with.

It was important for Henmi to overcome this hurdle on his own, but it was Yokozawa’s duty as his sempai to point him down the right path. He’d often been lectured by his superiors for his headstrong approach to matters and received his fair share of pep talks as well to get to where he was now.

“Yeah, their representative has quite a few quirks. He’s not a bad guy, but he can be kind of stubborn. We can talk it over more tonight.”

“I look forward to it!” he chirped, bowing his head meekly.

“But I guess that means we can’t drag our feet overtime tonight. Let’s hit the ground running after I finish this up.” And with that, he dug into the bentou Henmi had bought him.

Yokozawa was practically shoved through the ticket gates by a wave of humanity as he arrived in Ikebukuro for his meeting at Books Marimo. The place was always packed to the gills every time he came, and as he stepped out the East Exit, he let himself be carried along by the crowd, arriving after a few moments at a building quite large even for a bookstore.

Each floor was separated into different genres, with the comics floor located below-ground. Most of Yokozawa’s visits to the building were business-related, but given how knowledgeable all of the employees were, he valued the shop as a reader himself as well.

He recalled distantly that there were a few books from other companies set to go on sale right about now and felt his spirits lift; being able to check out the new releases on his way out was one of his few secret pleasures. But right now—he had business to attend to, and steeling himself once more, he stepped over the threshold inside.

“—Yokozawa-san!”

“...?” Had someone just called his name? He paused in place, glancing about, but failed to recognize any of the shop’s occupants. Maybe he’d misheard—or imagined it entirely.

“Over here!” On realizing he was being summoned from behind, he turned in place—and there found Iokawa standing with a gentle smile turned his way.

“Iokawa-san...” The sour expression he adopted here was because Iokawa was just about the *last* person in the world he wanted to see right now. Ever since that day in the elevator, he’d avoided all contact with Iokawa. He’d thought to meet up again after things at the office settled down, but an entire week had passed without his even realizing it, with the weekend bearing down upon him now. While making time after work during the week would have been the best way to go about handling the situation, he’d wound up having to work late overtime every day this week.

At present, he rarely had any opportunity to see Iokawa without Kirishima being involved—there was little chance of running into one another if Yokozawa didn’t go to Kirishima’s place, after all. Which basically meant that, unless Yokozawa deliberately made *plans* for them to see one another, there was very little risk of them meeting.

“What a coincidence, running into you here!”

“...Yes, indeed.”

“I’d like to think this is ‘fate’, but I’ve actually been dropping by after work on the off chance you might be around. You mentioned before you often come here, after all.”

“Huh...?” The fact that he’d specifically said he’d ‘been dropping by’ meant that this wasn’t a one-time thing; he’d been here *before*. It seemed that Iokawa had been hanging around here hoping to run into Yokozawa. “Persistence” might have sounded like an admirable trait on the surface, but Yokozawa’s lips unconsciously pursed at Iokawa’s

overwhelming enthusiasm. He thanked his lucky stars he rarely found himself in a position where he *had* to interact with someone who would likely never respond in the way he wanted them to, and while he understood well enough that the confession from before had been neither a joke nor delivered on a whim, it still didn't give him cause to feel as shaken as he was.

"I mean I'm glad to see you."

"Ah—well I have a previous engagement here, so I'll have to be on my way," he interrupted, getting the feeling that Iokawa intended to continue their conversation, but Iokawa dug in his heels merrily.

"Would you like to have dinner together when you're finished, then? Or tea would be fine as well. Given the hour, I expect you're heading straight home after this, right? Or do you have some other business to attend to?"

"Well—no, I'm free, but..." He'd left the office planning to go straight home after he'd finished here, so his schedule was wide open now. It was only after blurting out the truth that he realized he should have just professed some previous engagement.

"Then I'll wait for you to finish."

"But—no, I mean, I don't know what time I'll be out..."

"It's quite all right. I'll wait for however long it takes."

"———" And now he was finally realizing that this even, gentle smile of Iokawa's hid knives; if he'd come at Yokozawa with a strong, overbearing attitude, he would have responded in kind, but it was hard to go off on someone standing there smiling so blandly.

Panicking at the realization that it was nearly time for his meeting, Yokozawa groped for a way to turn Iokawa down—but then he noted...that this might be the perfect opportunity to deliver his formal response. The longer things like this dragged on, the more difficult and sticky the situation became, so he wanted to take care of things as quickly as possible.

"...All right then. I'll have tea with you," he allowed, reluctantly accepting Iokawa's invitation.

"You have my deepest apologies! I really should have contacted you sooner...!" the assistant manager apologized profusely, tipping his

body into a sharp bow at the waist. Apparently the manager with whom Yokozawa had scheduled his meeting had been called away on urgent business and was unavailable when he arrived. It seemed they'd tried contacting the office, and Henmi had taken a message and called Yokozawa's cell phone, but he hadn't noticed and wound up coming to the store anyway.

"Not at all—I'm at fault as well for not confirming properly. Shall we try this meeting again next week? I'll decide on the details of the date and time later."

"Of course, thank you! I'm really sorry you came all the way down here for nothing today." The assistant manager ducked his head again as Yokozawa left the comics floor.

Exiting the building, he noted that it was still rather light outside—and reflected that he should have invited Kirishima out. His talk with Iokawa wouldn't last too long, so maybe he should call him up now.

He'd been avoiding Kirishima for the past few days, due in part to how busy he was with work these days, but also because he hadn't yet decided how best to start the conversation. Just as his thoughts began to wander, though, the phone clenched in his hand buzzed to life, alerting an incoming call. A quick glance at the screen told him it was from the office.

"Yes, Yokozawa speaking."

"Ah, this is Henmi! I'm sorry for calling you so many times! Umm, actually—about Marimo-san—"

"I just left; seems the manager had some urgent business to attend to."

"Oh no! I guess I was too late..."

"Don't sweat it. I'm at fault too for not realizing you'd called." He'd probably received the call while being held up by Iokawa—the worst possible timing. "I was planning on heading straight home—unless you needed me back at the office?" He'd made sure to take care of all his own tasks before heading out, but there were always irregularities.

"I think it's fine for you to just take off for the day. There are a few items that need your confirmation, but they can all wait until Monday."

"Then I'll leave the rest to you. If you need anything, send me a text."

"Roger! Well, good work today!"

Henmi's bright, chipper voice tended to make all of the worries plaguing Yokozawa seem ridiculous. The guy could be kind of a flake at times, but Yokozawa envied him his cheery demeanor and had found himself indebted to his subordinate on a number of occasions.

"...Guess it's time to head out..." Pulling himself together, he headed for the cafe where Iokawa was waiting—a chain shop with a window facing a well-traveled street. He glanced inside, seeing that Iokawa had taken a seat along the counter at the window, then stepped inside. It was bustling and rather packed, with several customers lined up for to-go orders.

Truthfully, it wasn't the kind of place Yokozawa would have chosen to converse. If they were going to talk, it might be best to change locations—but now that he was here, he couldn't just *leave* without ordering something, so he took a place in line and ordered a cup of coffee before heading over to Iokawa.

"My apologies for the wait."

"Huh? That was rather quick." Iokawa had been immersed in a book, clearly expecting Yokozawa to take longer than he had.

"The person I was meeting had some emergency business to attend to, so we decided to reschedule."

"I see. It seems you came out here for nothing, then. Though it was quite a lucky break for *me* at least."

Yokozawa elected not to respond to the comment, instead silently bringing his coffee to his lips. "....." Now, the question was how to *start*. While he already knew the answer he wanted to deliver and therefore had no cause to dither about on *that* point, Iokawa's attitude from a few days back suggested that he was not only loath to give up, he was quite sharp as well. Yokozawa had initially pegged him as something of an airhead, but that seemed nothing more than a mask now. If that wasn't the case, he wouldn't have picked up on Yokozawa's and Kirishima's relationship so easily.

"So, have you read any good books lately?"

"Huh?"

"My favorite authors are all slow to release, so it can take ages for them to publish anything new, and I'm nearly finished with this book, so I thought I might pick up something on my way home."

Thrown a bit by the question delivered out of the blue, Yokozawa strained to recall the pieces he'd read recently. "There's Usami-sensei...but then, I suppose you've already read everything of his. What about Sumi-sensei? The period piece he just published through Onodera Shuppan was quite enjoyable." He had quite a few favorite authors, but he tended to only recommend the popular ones to others. The fact that their works sold so well spoke of how much their writing appealed to the masses.

"I see...a period piece, huh... I'm not too good with historical novels, so I tend to avoid them, but this might be a good opportunity to give one a try! I can't go wrong with a recommendation from you, after all."

Iokawa showed no signs of ceasing his mindless small talk, seemingly intent on not allowing Yokozawa to give him his "answer". "...Iokawa-san, I'm quite sure this is *not* the kind of conversation you invited me here for."

"...Yes, you're right. My apologies. I just got a bit carried away being able to have tea with you," he admitted, a wry smile coming to his lips.

Yokozawa would have preferred they have this conversation elsewhere, but after deciding it was better not to drag this out unnecessarily, he decided to say his piece. The cafe was still bustling with life, but no one was paying them particular attention. "...About the other day—"

"You can have longer to think about it, if you like," Iokawa interrupted, evidently hoping to put off letting Yokozawa say what he wanted to say.

"No—I've already made my decision."

"Have you, then?"

"....." His breath caught in his throat as Iokawa fixed his gaze on him, seeming to peer straight through his eyes, as if seeking out the very worries and concerns dogging Yokozawa's steps these days.

He hadn't lied; he *did* already know how he wanted to respond to Iokawa—hadn't needed any time to think on it. What he *wasn't* sure about...was where he stood. His gut feelings and the thoughts in his head just refused to sync. Iokawa might very well be trying to take advantage of that to unsettle Yokozawa.

"...Are you sure you wouldn't like to try it? Just once?"

"Huh?"

"Returns are, of course, accepted—I'm sure there's a lot about me that you may find unacceptable. But—for that very reason, I'd like at least a *chance* to make my case. Let's see...why don't we just start off as friends?" Iokawa had slipped right into a sales-pitch-style approach.

"I'm sorry—but I just can't do that. I think we shouldn't meet privately like this anymore."

"So we can't even just start off as friends?"

"I can't act in bad faith."

But even this curt, direct response elicited a smile from Iokawa. "I'm quite fond of this serious, awkward side to you, you know."

"....." It struck him here that Kirishima had said something similar before. It wasn't that he wasn't *happy* having aspects of his personally he'd believed to be shortcomings actually *praised*, but whether or not that was enough to shift his feelings was another matter entirely.

Reflecting on it now...he probably never would have fallen for Kirishima if he hadn't been the one to initiate their liaison—but he hadn't fallen in love just from having affection one-sidedly heaped upon him. Yokozawa loved him because he'd been drawn to the man *himself*.

The human heart was at once simple and complex; human nature in and of itself was rife with inconsistencies—and he'd never been faced with his own emotions like this until he'd met Kirishima. He'd worn an armored suit of irritation for all to see to distract from the true feelings he kept hidden deep in his heart. But no longer.

"It doesn't have to be right away—I'll wait as long as it takes."

"No—regardless of how long you wait, I'll never be able to return your feelings." Iokawa just would *not* give up, and Yokozawa groped for some way to put him off. "I'll wait" sounded innocent enough

on the surface, but it meant he would just be lurking about hoping Yokozawa's relationship with Kirishima would come to an end. In that sense, it wasn't a very nice notion at all.

"Then does that mean you've made a decision about your future?"

"—!" His gaze faltered when Iokawa brought up his "future". So he *had* realized that there was still doubt and uncertainty lurking in Yokozawa's heart after all...

"I'm perfectly fine being your 'insurance.' Just keep me in a little corner of your mind, that's all I ask." The hand he'd had resting on the counter shifted to cover Yokozawa's own—

But just as he suppressed a shudder, a hand grabbed him by the shoulder to forcibly drag him away from Iokawa.

".....?!" Yokozawa was dumbstruck, utterly bewildered by what had just happened—and as he twisted around to face the person who'd just jerked him away...he met Kirishima, his hand still gripping Yokozawa by the shoulder and staring down at Iokawa with an expression cold as an arctic blast.

"...I *distinctly* recall telling you to go through *me* if you wanted to speak to this guy again." His tone was detached and bland—but his gaze was frigid, no jokes peppering his conversation today.



But despite Kirishima radiating an aura that would've given even Yokozawa pause to speak, Iokawa countered easily, "Are you so very sure you have any right to demand as such?"

"I do. Seeing as he's *mine*."

“.....!” Yokozawa’s face flushed beet red before Iokawa could respond—Kirishima’s comment had been completely out of the blue, leaving him next to no time to collect himself. Blushing and frozen stiff with shock at the declaration, it was only belatedly that he realized this was *not* the kind of conversation they ought to be holding in a public place, let alone a cafe near a business partner. He’d never live it down if someone he knew overheard them.

Kirishima ignored Yokozawa’s silent panic attack, though—not letting his problematic display stop at mere *words*. He grabbed Yokozawa’s hand in his own and dragged him out of the shop—hardly something two grown men ought to be doing and all the more outlandish for it.

“H—hey, think about where we are!” he hissed. What the hell was he thinking, resorting to this kind of thing in public?!

Kirishima ignored the warning. “Shut up. I’m afraid I’m not so nice a guy that I’m just gonna sit back and watch while some dick with less-than-pure intent tries to make a move on what’s *mine*.”

He now realized that when Kirishima had dragged him out of the cafe, he’d directed them *away* from the station. “Where the hell are we going?” His answer came when they drew to a stop at the entrance to a paid parking lot, and Kirishima used the remote on his key chain to unlock the door to his car, urging Yokozawa to get inside.

With no real grounds to refuse, he slid into the passenger seat without protest. It was never a good idea to disobey Kirishima when he was in one of his moods. “...Why do you have your car?”

“Because I drove it to the office.”

His childish response inspired a flash of irritation. “And I’m asking you *why* you did that.”

“Because I had something I wanted to pick up on the way home.” Likely something too unwieldy to carry by hand. It was hardly the response he’d been looking for, but he had bigger things to worry about just now.

“What the hell were you doing there in the first place?” Showing up with the timing he had suggested that Kirishima had been *watching* them.

"I heard where you were from Henmi and came after you—then when I spotted you driving past, I parked the car as soon as I could. Fucking hell—how many times do I have to *tell* you? Your armor's full of chinks—so watch your ass! Don't let him *grab your hand!*"

"I...I'm sorry..." He had nothing to say in response, and thus delivered an apology without protest. Looking back on the events that had just unfolded, he realized that Kirishima's breathing had been somewhat labored as he'd stood being Yokozawa—which meant he'd *run* the whole way from the parking lot back to the cafe. The thought left him feeling more than a little awkward and uncomfortable.

"Your sincerity's something to be applauded and all, but don't you think you're doing more harm than good by giving the other party *hope?*"

"That's..." ...probably right. Maybe he'd just wanted to soothe the guilt of not being able to return Iokawa's feelings with a good show of sincerity. After all, he knew the pain of being spurned—which had been precisely why he'd been unable to put his foot down and be firm. Whether or not that was for the ultimate good of the other party, though...was a different matter.

Being waited for was difficult enough—but it had to be just as bad for the one doing the waiting. Iokawa might have claimed that he was fine waiting...but did it mean he was willing to go through all the pain and hardship that came with it?

What he'd been trying to do might have wound up as little more than a stopgap measure.

"And there's one more thing I want to ask, too: you're hiding something from me still, aren't you...?"

".....!" Yokozawa's words stilled in his throat at Kirishima's sharp notice, and a cold sweat broke out over his palms.

"...Something happened, didn't it? In the elevator. You've been acting weird ever since that day..."

It seemed he hadn't been all that successful in hiding it, and gritting his teeth with the knowledge that he had no choice but to face the music—he wound up starting with an excuse. "Oh, that was...I mean, it was more like an *accident* really, just kind of caught me off guard..."

"I don't need the introduction—spit it out already."

He'd hoped to explain that he'd had no control over the situation, but that didn't look like it was going to happen. "He...kissed me."

It was just three little words, but that didn't stop them from being *unbearably* shameful to admit.

Kirishima's eyes went wide with shock at Yokozawa's mumbled confession. "He—*what?! What the hell were you thinking?!*"

"It's not like I could help it! I didn't exactly have time to dodge something that came at me out of the blue!"

"*This* is what I mean when I say you've got chinks all over your armor! You—*idiot!* Why the hell would you go and have *tea* with someone who forced a kiss on you?! Just how much of a 'nice guy' can you be?!"

"....." When put like that...Yokozawa really had nothing to say in defense of himself. He probably *had* been doling out opportunities to take advantage of the moment left and right back then.

"...Wait, were you...actually hesitating...over that?"

"Huh?"

"Well—you've been kind of lost in thought lately. So I wondered if maybe...you might actually be thinking you...prefer him to me..."

"What the—*as if!* Where the hell did you get a ridiculous idea like that?!" It was now Yokozawa's turn to be dumbfounded, appalled at the realization that the reason Kirishima had been so nosy lately was because he'd been entertaining thoughts like *that*.

Kirishima defended himself in the wake of Yokozawa's shock over his misguided worry. "Well, you can be kind of a pushover sometimes! Plus—he's closer to your age, and he doesn't have a kid. And you looked like you had a lot in common, so I just thought...you know, *maybe...*"

"So what if we had common ground to chat on? Besides, you really think I can be all that picky about the people I discuss work with?"

"Then—what the hell have you been agonizing over these past few days?"

"...That's..." He opened his mouth to respond, but then faltered, groping for the right phrasing. How could he word his argument

to ensure that Kirishima properly understood his concerns? After a few long moments' consideration, though, he began carefully, "I was thinking...about the 'future'..."

This might be the perfect opportunity to really explain himself—and what he'd been thinking—fully. Even if the end result was the same, at least if it was a conclusion they'd come to *together*, he might be able to move past all this without any lingering regrets.

"The...future?" The bitter, torn expression on Kirishima's face might have been put there by the dark tone of Yokozawa's words.

"The 'present' is...really enjoyable right now; hell, I feel so happy, it's like some luxury I shouldn't be allowed to have. But—it can't be like this forever...right?" It was a bit embarrassing putting his feelings into such frank language, but if he dithered over his wording now and resorted to vagueries, he probably couldn't get his message across properly.

"...I don't understand what you're saying."

"What I'm *saying*—is that don't you think it's gonna start getting difficult...being together like this? In the future, I mean?"

"I didn't mean I didn't understand what the *words* meant. I meant I don't understand *why you're saying them*. Are you saying you want to break up?"

Yokozawa felt a coldness grip his chest at the words *break up*, and a chill enveloped his whole body, freezing him in place as a shudder roiled through him. When he spoke again to explain himself, his voice trembled. "Of course I don't...want to break up. But—Hiyo's growing up, and she's gonna start *noticing* things. I can't be hanging around, going in and out of your place like I am now forever."

"...Wait, *that's* what you've been *angsting* over?!" And instantly the tension built by Yokozawa's confession was dispelled.

Yokozawa felt a flash of irritation at the relaxed reaction; he'd put his whole self out there just now! "Dammit, I'm being *serious* here!" It felt as if his genuine concerns were being dismissed without a care, and his voice rose in tone—but he cut himself off when Kirishima pulled the car off onto the shoulder and killed the engine. "Wh—what're you..."

"Are you an *idiot*?"

“Wha—?!” A finger thrust into his face cut off his objections, though.

“Just so we’re clear here? I’m pretty damn *shocked* right now. You’ve just belittled not just *me*, but *Hiyo*, too!”

“—!!” He gulped guiltily at the sharp gaze Kirishima fixed upon him; was this how a frog felt when a snake had it in its sights?

“I plan on telling Hiyori everything eventually—not *now* of course, but some day. Didn’t I tell you before? I’m not raising a prejudiced child. And besides—did you seriously think she’d be shaken up by this kind of thing? I’m pretty sure she’s too good for that.” Kirishima delivered his reprimand in a soft voice.

“Still—there’s *other people* to worry about! If I keep dropping by your place like this, strange rumors might start cropping up. I couldn’t stand if people started talking shit about you or Hiyo!” Even if he hadn’t had to worry about Hiyori herself, there was still the public eye to be concerned with. If something were to happen and brought rude looks her way...it frightened Yokozawa just *thinking* about it.

“...I’m glad you care about us. But—what’s the point of always thinking the *worst* is gonna happen. Testing a bridge before you cross it is all well and good—but put it through too much stress and you’re gonna break it.”

“I can’t help it! This is the first time in my whole damn life I’ve ever had something so important to me!” He gaped in shock at the words coming from his own lips. He saw the Kirishimas as something precious to him; they were the first people he’d ever met that he’d wanted *so badly* to protect, when in the past he’d always been so forceful—and if he didn’t have any contact further contact with them, he could avoid hurting them. That was why he’d concluded that it was best to break things off.

“...You really are an idiot.” Kirishima’s tone as he spoke, though, was gentle, and despite the shock the words reflected, it carried an affectionate echo.

“...Shut up. It’s not like I don’t already know that.”

“I’ll admit—what you’re afraid of happening *isn’t* impossible, and sure, there might be some people out there who feel like being petty gossips. But—there are a hell of a lot of people who’d be on our side

too, you know. Why do you think I've gone to such lengths to be all chummy with my neighbors?"

"Huh?" He balked at the sudden shift in topic to include affairs around the apartment complex.

Kirishima's expression grew more serious, and he urged the still-quiet-confused Yokozawa, "...Try being a little friendlier with the housewives, would you? Never underestimate the power of stay-at-home moms."

"Uh...okay...?"

"Gossips don't tend to keep a lot of decent friends around, so building up a circle of trust now should help in the long run." It seemed that Kirishima had been doing a lot of thinking on this point in his own way, and Yokozawa felt more and more like an idiot for agonizing over this all on his own.

"Good grief; you'll pull off the most audacious things in the office—but when it comes to your own private life, you're just a big scaredy cat, aren't you? All right—now's your chance. Lay it all out for me. Anything else bugging you?"

Yokozawa's chest tightened at the gentle gaze Kirishima fixed him with, as if watching over him, protective him. He bit back the wave of emotion that threatened to crest—and finally voiced the worry that had been plaguing him for so long: "...Are you sure? That you want me...?"

"...You have to ask that? After *all this time*? Though...yeah, I guess I get it. The kinds of things you feel like you still aren't sure about after so long...are the ones that cause the most grief, huh?" Kirishima reflected, realizing he really didn't have a leg to stand on, and a bitter smile rose to his lips. *Love* was precisely what caused these worries to crop up. And they probably could no longer escape them. "...You're the one I want to spend the rest of my life with. It *has* to be you."

His words, delivered so matter-of-factly, slipped soft and silent into Yokozawa's heart, like raindrops soaking into parched earth. These had probably been the words he'd been so desperately yearning for.

They would likely face many more hurdles in the future—but they would not do so alone. They could worry about these things *together*. And that in and of itself would lead to the best possible conclusion.

“I have absolutely no intention of letting you go. There’s no other man who could make you happy—so just accept it already.”

“...Sure you aren’t getting a little full of yourself, there?” Yokozawa sniped in return, taken aback by Kirishima’s brilliant smile. He had a point though; Yokozawa was pretty sure the only man who could possibly put up with someone with as irritating a personality as his was Kirishima.

“Well what about *you*? You’d better not be planning on making *me* do all the confessing here.” His gaze was starting to take on that familiar teasing glint, now—though Yokozawa understood well that Kirishima’s attempts to ruffle his feathers were merely one way he showed how much he cared, and despite finding the teasing rather irritating on the surface, he would never say he wholly disliked it.

“...I’m pretty sure I couldn’t live without you either.”

“Come again?”

And at Kirishima’s retort that was reminiscent of marketplace haggling, Yokozawa felt a sudden urge to tease well up within: “*I love you.*”

“—...what did you just say?”

“You heard me.”

“W—wait, I’m gonna record it this time, once more!” His fingers trembled with panic as he frantically pulled out his cell phone, leaving Yokozawa to reflect that this could very well be the first time he’d ever seen Kirishima so unsettled. Was it *always* this fun, tearing down a man usually oozing confidence and composure?

A sharp chuckle bubbled up unbidden from his throat. “Yeah right. As if you’d catch me ever saying that kind of thing twice.” After all, it wasn’t something he really *could* repeat; he’d suffered enough damage saying it the *first* time.

“That’s—*cheating*! Going for the throat when I wasn’t expecting it...” Typically the one on the losing side of these sorts of conversations, Yokozawa enjoyed the rare taste of victory, seeing how

utterly frustrated Kirishima was by the situation. He'd probably wind up regretting it later, but he'd cross that bridge when he got to it.

"Hey, you don't own the patent on pulling shit on others when they aren't expecting it," Yokozawa crowed, donning a rather self-satisfied smile.

Kirishima brought the car to a gentle stop in a corner of an expansive parking area near the beachfront. Through the windshield, one could see the flat glassy surface of a black sea and a starry sky.

"...The ocean?"

"Hey, can't knock a classic move."

"This isn't *classic*, it's *clichéd*." Supposedly this was meant to be a romantic date course, but if this had been part of a magazine spread, Yokozawa was certain those were the kinds of complaints that would be posed.

Had this been the middle of a bright summer day, this parking lot would probably be packed end to end with cars, but this evening there were only a few other cars besides their own here at the moment.

"I just wanted to come out here alone with you once."

"We were *just* alone together not that long ago." He'd been driven home, and Kirishima had invited himself inside. He supposed that was what they called a wolf following you home.

"Sure, but that was then. It wasn't a date."

"...I just don't get you sometimes." Kirishima could be really picky about setting the mood. Maybe it was his instincts as an editor, or maybe it was just how he was wired. Yokozawa really couldn't care less, himself. So long as they could be alone together, the location didn't really matter to him.

But the starry sky above them this evening was a thing to behold. The twinkling stars were outmatched by the lights of the buildings further into the city, but out here, with relatively little unnatural light, they seemed rather brilliant.

"Since we're here, let's at least sit outside."

"Sure."

Kirishima cut the engine, and they stepped out of the car, walking around to the front to sit atop the hood. Reflecting on the moment,

Yokozawa realized that this was probably the first time he'd ever come to the beach at night. The flickering lights that called out from across the vast jet-black expanse that felt like it could just suck him right in were likely ships, not stars. "Wish Hiyo could've seen this..."

"Wanna snap a pic on the way back?"

"If we do that, she'll realize we snuck out here alone. Oh—that reminds me, what'd you do with her? You'd better not have left her on her own again."

"My mom's visiting tonight. She's staying over, so there's nothing to worry about."

A wave of relief washed over Yokozawa—but brought in its wake another concern. If he'd asked Hiyori's grandmother to watch her tonight...then that meant their coming here hadn't been a decision made in the heat of the moment. "...Did you plan on bringing me here all along?"

"Mmm, yeah, kinda. You've been looking kind of dark and depressed lately, so I thought I'd bring you out here for a change of pace. Don't you remember what I said? I had something I wanted to pick up on the way home."

"Then that..."

"Yup. I was talking about *you*. I freaked out when I'd gone through all this trouble to get everything prepped, only to find you gone when I headed down to Sales." Which had been when he'd asked Henmi where Yokozawa had gone and chased after him, apparently. He must have passed the cafe Yokozawa had been in on his way to Books Marimo, only glimpsing Yokozawa and Iokawa speaking by mere chance.

"You should've just *called*."

"I didn't want you rabbiting on me. You've been avoiding me lately, after all."

"I wasn't *avoiding* you—I just...needed to get things straight in my head."

"Yeah, I know. Or rather, I know *now*. You really need to do something about that bad habit of keeping all your problems bottled up inside. That's how these things get started in the first place."

"What the hell—you think it's like symptoms of a cold or something?"

"C'mon, it's not a *horrible* comparison; you have to nip these things in the bud, is what I mean.... So, what're you gonna do? That guy didn't seem like he was ready to give up just yet."

"Leave it to me; I'll take care of it." Iokawa had seen through to Yokozawa's concerns and thought it a chance for him to grab a foothold. But now that he'd resolved those concerns, he simply had to make Iokawa understand the same.

"Well—take care not to let him get his grubby hands on you this time."

"Yeah yeah, I know."

"...Dammit, this still doesn't sit well with me. I'm going with you, as a look-out."

"The hell you are. This isn't a field trip."

"You're right; I trust Hiyo a hell of a lot more when I let her go on field trips."

"...So you seriously don't trust me, then...?"

"Not when I know how easy it is to get in under your guard. Though I have to admit—I do find that *quite* advantageous at times..." And as if to say *such as now, for example*, he slipped in close and captured Yokozawa's lips with his own. Shocked at the move, Yokozawa's mind went blank for a moment—before he immediately shoved Kirishima away.

"Cut it out! What're you gonna say if someone sees us?!" It was dark all around them, and there was quite a bit of space between the cars that were still here, meaning no one could probably make out their faces, but that didn't give them permission to do something so stupid.

"C'mon, it was just a little peck. What's it gonna hurt? You really think anyone's watching us? Everyone else here's doing pretty much the same thing; they don't care what some other couple's doing." Kirishima had a point; the only people who would come all the way out to this dimly lit beach during the off-season were those on dates.

"Still...!"

"It's just a kiss."

“Hey-*wai*-!” He knew if he struggled, any grand movements would only draw the attention of others—and these worries proved his undoing, as he once again found his lips sealed. “Mm-ngh...!”



When a tongue slipped inside, Yokozawa unconsciously responded, and despite knowing in his head that he *needed* to put a stop to this, his body refused to listen to him. That hot tongue always undid Yokozawa, paralyzing him to the very core, and as he felt a wave of suffocation sweep over him from the unyielding kiss, his mind started to go foggy.

His tongue, twined about Kirishima's own, began to go numb, and he felt all conscious thought flee. Once things got this far, he knew he couldn't object to anything Kirishima asked of him anymore. But just as he'd about thrown in the towel, Kirishima pulled away.

"...Shit," he muttered bitterly, his expression reflecting his concern.

"...What's wrong?" Yokozawa felt himself grow a bit anxious at Kirishima's uncharacteristically serious mien, but the answer he received in response only gave him a headache:

"I kinda got a hard-on."

"*You...*!" Yokozawa felt the strength leave him at Kirishima's frank confession of his current state. He *really* wished the guy would reflect on his own words and actions before lecturing Yokozawa about breaking the mood.

"I honestly *did* only mean to ask for a kiss..." Kirishima admitted, regret tinging his tone, before tugging Yokozawa around and urging him into the backseat of the car, Kirishima himself following right after and straddling Yokozawa.

"Hey—just how far are you planning to go, then?!" he hissed, wary now that Kirishima was actually thinking of going the whole way in a place like this, and just as he feared, Kirishima began running his hands over Yokozawa's chest through his dress shirt. "Wai—just a minute, you...!"

"I can just touch, right?"

"Sure, if I had *any* faith that you'd stop there. Which I don't." He couldn't muster up trust in this situation. Kirishima had *yet*, even once, to stop at 'just a little' when that was all he'd initially asked for. Plus—Yokozawa was a man himself and knew full well just how impossible it would become, from a physical standpoint, to stop once they got going.

He should've seen this coming when Kirishima had stolen the kiss. Even now, asking only to touch, Kirishima's movements bespoke a clear intent to get *serious*.

"Kinda hard to find them when you've got an undershirt on, huh..."

"What're you talk-?!" Kirishima gave the nub he'd been searching for a sharp pinch through his shirt, and as he rolled the nipple between his fingers, Yokozawa cried out in a mix of pain and pleasure. "You...said you were just going to touch...!"

"I *am* just touching. All I'm doing is putting a little extra effort into it."

"Ngh...!" The painful stimulus inspired even greater pleasure, causing Yokozawa to wonder if he perhaps deep down had some masochistic tendencies, given how much he was getting turned on by this sort of thing. The soft brush of lips pressed against his neck and the hot, heavy breaths conspired to push him into the mood, whether he wanted to be or not. "No...no more...than this..."

"C'mon, don't be so stiff... Surely *you're* not satisfied like this, either?"

"Wha...?!" Kirishima groped Yokozawa, confirming his suspicions, and while he wasn't at 100% yet, he was clearly showing some changes, the shaft thickening even further under Kirishima's attentions.

"See?"

"This—is just because...you grabbed me just now..."

"Ah, I see. So in other words, you want me to do it *more*..."

"Who the hell said anything about..." Kirishima began to teasingly stroke him through his pants, and Yokozawa felt himself harden even further. It was times like this where he found being male *truly* inconvenient, as even if he wanted to play it cool, anyone could easily see him reacting.

"I see your body at least has no problem being honest—ugh, okay, even *I'm* tired of this stupid cliched conversation now. Sure would be nice for *you* to take the initiative now and then, though."

"Take the...as if I could!" It was embarrassing enough doing that kind of thing even as a *joke*; to take it seriously? Impossible.

“Good grief... You’re always so damn *new*, look how red your face is!”

“It’s too dark for you to see!”

“Maybe, but I can tell. You feel warmer than usual.”

“.....!” He felt the back of a finger stroke along his cheek, sending a shudder down his spine, and while he would have liked to snap at Kirishima not to spit out such embarrassing words with a serious expression, he knew it was too dangerous to meet the man’s gaze just now. “What...are you thinking?!”

“You’re gonna make me say it, even when you already know?”

“I’m *reprimanding* you! Think about where we are!” It was cramped enough with two grown men inside this small car, so he couldn’t even begin to fathom what might be going through someone’s head if they thought this was a good place to *screw*.

“Situations like this now and then are kind of a turn-on, don’tcha think?”

“Who the hell needs a *turn-on*?” Simply *being around* Kirishima was in and of itself stimulating enough; if he had to make a choice, he’d probably rather have *less* excitement, but he didn’t see Kirishima bending on that point.

Kirishima didn’t seem intent on practicing any restraint, though, and Yokozawa was about past the point of no return himself. If they absolutely *had* to do this, he still didn’t want to do it in the *car*.

“...Can’t we at least change locations?” It was a rather grand concession on Yokozawa’s part, if he did say so himself. As long as it was in some sort of private room, he didn’t care *where* they did it at this point.

“...You *really* don’t want to do it in the car *that* badly?”

“I *really* don’t.” *Hiyori* used this car, after all; he didn’t want to sully this place. What if something happened and they wound up getting the seats dirty?

“...Okay, I understand how you’re feeling.”

“Then—” But just as he felt relief that Kirishima seemed to agree with his point, nodding deeply, he was presented with a completely unexpected alternative:

"I'll just have to make you feel *so* good, you don't care where we are."

"That doesn't solve the problem!"

"I've postponed any decision for now—or rather, shelved the matter entirely?"

"Ugh, the hell does it matter..." Kirishima's playing dumb was a clear indicator that he was trying to put off any further protest from Yokozawa, and while Yokozawa wasn't stupid enough to be fooled by his efforts, he was starting to lose any will to fight. It seemed he was going to wind up playing right into Kirishima's hand after all.

"...Just *once*. Please?"

Yokozawa was weak when Kirishima begged him like this, soft and murmuring—which was why Kirishima asked in that tone in the first place at moments when he knew he had to bring it home.

"...It *better* be *just once*." It was probably foolish to give in when he *knew* the likelihood of only doing it once was disturbingly low, and while he could see clearly he was going to regret this, at least he was taking responsibility here.

"Hnnng..." Kirishima slowly slid in, and Yokozawa grit his teeth, fighting back the high moan that strained to spill out as he was filled. "Th...at..."

"Loosen up a little..." Kirishima reached a hand out and gently stroked Yokozawa's rock-hard cock, easing in further.

"Just...hurry...the fuck up..." He *hated* being teased, so even if it wound up hurting, he'd rather Kirishima just slam home in one stroke. In fact, his *hips* were killing him *far* more than his ass just now. His body was contorted in ways it wasn't meant to be, and his joints were crying out for relief. He was managing to bear it, having found a suitable position, but pain was still pain.

"Don't rush me."

"Nn...hnnm...!" Kirishima slid in with finality, fully seated, and a sharp shudder rippled up Yokozawa's spine.

“Fuck, you’re tight...” In contrast to Yokozawa, stripped down to just his dress shirt, Kirishima had only opened the front of his pants—which Yokozawa thought was *exceedingly* unfair.

And because they’d joined with such impatience, it was even tighter than usual—in reality, Yokozawa wondered how they were even going to *move* like this. The only thing he still had control over at this point were his words: “Screw you...you planned on doing this all along...”

He’d claimed his body had just been swept away by the mood, but he’d come *eerily* prepared. Despite saying he’d only wanted a kiss, he’d brought along some lube and even slipped on a thin *condom*, when Yokozawa had complained that he didn’t want to get the seats dirty.

“You know what they say—always be prepared! I really *did* only intend for this to be an innocent date. Thought we could grab something to eat as we went along, without any particular plans...”

“Someone was confident...” He fixed a sharp glare on Kirishima, who flicked his gaze away innocently, and cursed mentally *this sly dog*... Or well, maybe ‘fox’ was more apt.

“Still, guess it’s possible to make it work inside a car after all, huh...”

“No, you just *forced* it to work! *Dammit*, if I fuck up my hips because of this, you’re gonna pay!” The awkward position was going to be hell on his hips, and the notion of two men being able to contort themselves about each other in such a cramped space was flawed to begin with.

“Don’t worry; I’ll be an *excellent* caregiver.”

“At least say you’ll *nurse me back to health*,” he corrected wearily. The phrasing made it sound like he was bound for a nursing home.

“Don’t sweat the small stuff. ...So, are we good now?” Apparently he’d been stalling to give Yokozawa’s body time to adjust, using their light banter to distract from the discomfort.

“...Just get it over with.”

“...You know, when you say it like *that*, it just makes me want to take my sweet time.”

"You *promised*—just once," he reminded for the umpteenth time. If he didn't keep doing so, there was no doubt in his mind that the particulars of their agreement would become muddled.

"Yeah yeah, I know." Just as Kirishima finished his sentence, though, he gave a great thrusting snap of his hips.

"Ha—*ah*...!" Yokozawa was still unclear as to whether or not Kirishima *truly* understood—but he was in no position now to ask again. Over and over and over, Kirishima bore deep into his body, his tempo rising on each successive pass. His breathing quickly grew labored, and at the violent thrusting in and out, he felt his pleasure rising unbidden. "Aah—ha...!"

His channel quivered sweetly with each pass, feeling as if he were melting from the inside out, and all of the initial discomfort dissipated, leaving behind nothing but lancing pleasure.

"You're nice and tight today... Feels even more amazing than usual..."



“Shut...up...ngh.” It was the only thing he could say in response—because it was *true*. Swallowing his irritation, he reluctantly wrapped his arms around Kirishima and dug his nails into the man’s back.

“Is that your way of telling me to quit with the idle chatter? Someone’s demanding today...” His tone made him sound fondly disapproving—but as Yokozawa saw it, Kirishima was *far* more demanding and selfish than he. The very fact that they were doing this *at all* in this kind of place was something he objected to; he’d only given in with *great* reluctance.

“If you...don’t like it...then get your dick outta me...”

“As if I could with you *clinging* to me like this...” With a light laugh, he gave a few shallow thrusts, pulling out just far enough to ensure that Yokozawa got a good look.

Then, as if a switch had been flipped by Yokozawa’s words, Kirishima changed his angle of thrust and began pouring himself into well and truly fucking him.

“Nngh...! Aah....A-ah...!” Again and again, Kirishima thrust deep and hard, and when Yokozawa caught a glance of his face, the smile from before had completely disappeared. With each drilling pass, the sounds of their slick joining filled the car, and the enclosed space made Yokozawa’s moans sound all the louder.

“Look at me.”

“.....!!”

He’s going to consume me... That was the only thought that passed through his mind when he felt that sharp gaze lance through him.

The rough thrusts were driving him wild, and his toes wavered in the air at the end of his bent legs, occasionally bumping up against the glass. He could feel his climax bearing down on him as his body was rocked with juddering thrusts.

I can’t...I’m gonna... Just as he was sure he couldn’t last another moment, his vision flashed brilliantly, and his mind went completely blank. “Uhn...hhaa...!!”

“....ngh-!”

They met their peaks at almost the same time—limbs going stiff as their release washed over them both.

While the park he found himself in on a Sunday afternoon had been bustling with the lively antics of local grade schoolers only recently,

once the neighborhood bell sounded announcing it was 5 PM, they had all dispersed.

Yokozawa took a seat on a bench in a far corner of the park, wary of being labeled ‘suspicious’, and in short order, he began to attract a group of feral cats, as usual. Despite always ensuring that he never doled out any sort of treats, he always seemed to find himself welcomed eagerly by dogs and cats, wherever he went. Maybe they just felt a friendly air from him.

Scratching the ears of one cat that had leapt up into his lap, he settled in to wait for the person he had an appointment with. His palms were a bit sweaty with nerves today.

“My apologies for the wait!” a voice called out to him from a ways away, and when he snapped his head up, he found the person he’d been waiting on striding over to meet him: Iokawa.

As if it could sense Yokozawa’s tension rising, the calico that had been resting atop his lap leapt down and slunk off to hide in a nearby thicket, and the remaining few that had been settled at his feet gave the new visitor a wide berth.

“I’m sorry to call you out like this.” He stood and ducked his head in a bow. He wondered if Iokawa had perhaps come to the park at a jog, for his breathing was labored.

“Anything for you, Yokozawa-san. I’d hoped to make it here sooner, but I was a little scatterbrained in taking my leave, so I wound up taking more time.”

“I was the one who invited you out on short notice, so please think nothing of it. Would you like to take a seat?” He extended a hand to the bench in invitation, then settled down again himself.

The reason he had called Iokawa out today was to discuss a certain sensitive matter. While he might have been able to accomplish it easily through a text, he wasn’t confident he’d be able to get his point across properly through such means. So in order to speak his mind and make his feelings clearly understood, he’d arranged to have them meet like this.

Knowing that he wouldn’t be able to keep calm if they met in a place with others around, like last time, and yet wary all the same of being alone with Iokawa, he’d decided to ask him to meet in a

place they'd run into one another before: this park. During the day, it was usually bustling with children playing, but it was quiet now that evening had fallen.

"The days are getting shorter, huh..."

"Well we're halfway through October." Once the days started shortening, it really hit home how quickly the year had passed, and while Yokozawa had tried to go along with the idle conversation Iokawa had started, it didn't last as long as their chats usually did.

Iokawa must have sensed something different in the atmosphere between them as well. "So...when you said you wanted to talk, you meant about...that matter, didn't you?"

"I did." Iokawa had gotten the jump on him, it seemed, diving right into the issue at hand while Yokozawa had groped about blindly for a way to bring it up. Maybe he just couldn't handle the tension between them any longer.

"...So have you decided to give us a shot?" His words were playful, but his tone lacked its usual lightness. It seemed Yokozawa wasn't the only one nervous here.

"...I'm sorry. As I told you before, I can't return your feelings."

"...Never? Not even a little bit?"

"Years may pass, and my feelings won't change. Those two are more precious to me than anything in the world. I don't want to hurt them, nor do I want to do anything that might give them cause to worry."

"Even if the mere act of being together with him might hurt him?"

"I understand there's that risk, and that's exactly why I'm going to do my level best to ensure it *doesn't* happen. There are many problems that we'll face that we'll have to struggle past, but I've decided to face those problems head on—together with him—rather than flee from them." Yokozawa's words were sincere and earnest, and the reason he'd been able to come to such a conclusion was all thanks to Iokawa pointing out the issue in the first place.

If he hadn't posed that question to Yokozawa before, he probably would've spent a *long* time unsure of his feelings or convictions, stuck in a limbo of uncertainty. So it was, in that sense, that he felt a deep sense of gratitude towards the man.

“...Why am I not good enough?” All of the ease and confidence had fled Iokawa’s features. Maybe it had never even really been there in the first place, nothing more than a mask. And now that the mask had been stripped away, what was left was his true form.

“I was...stuck, for a long time. Pining after someone I knew I couldn’t have, unable to give up my feelings for them.”

“Was that...Kirishima-san?”

“No, someone else.” Love had always been something painful, something that *hurt* for Yokozawa. He’d wanted to be *special* to someone, and just being able to be near that man...had given Yokozawa a sense of being *worth* something. Maybe that was what he’d truly believed back then.

But Takano had chosen someone else. In truth, Yokozawa had never even been in the running, but he’d refused to accept his lot and made an utter fool of himself. His loneliness had sapped all of the confidence from his heart, and he’d turned his anger in on himself.

“But thanks to Kirishima-san, I was able to move on. He’s the one that taught me...that love can be more than just pain. If it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t be the man I am today.”

“_____”

Whenever he was with Kirishima, so many emotions he’d never known himself to possess welled up within, and something deep inside warmed, floating lightly—the first time he’d ever felt such a sensation. It wouldn’t be overstating the matter to say that his entire world had changed, now so bright and brilliant that they made his dull, dark, stagnant life of before seem like nothing more than a bad dream.

Maybe what he’d felt back then...hadn’t really been ‘love’ at all—but adoration, obsession, possession. His warped longing had in turn warped his true feelings as well.

“I was happy to hear you say you liked me, but...I’m confident you never would have said so to the man I was before.” He didn’t know if Iokawa would have fallen in love with him back then; in fact, he was more confident that the man would’ve given him a wide, wary berth.

“So then...you’re saying that Kirishima-san changed you?”

“It might not be entirely accurate to say that I changed—more like...my field of view expanded. I’ve been told I’m easier on my

subordinates now, you know.” He tried to find appropriate language to describe the shift, but nothing really seemed to fit, and he wondered what Kirishima might say in this situation.

“...You really must love Kirishima-san. With the way you’re singing his praises here, I suppose I have no choice but to yield...”

“I—I wasn’t *singing his praises...*” he mumbled, flushing deeply even though he knew Iokawa hadn’t been teasing him. He knew he wasn’t blessed with a silver tongue, so that meant he was forced to say what he felt clearly and unequivocally.

Smiling sadly at the flustered Yokozawa, Iokawa looked as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. “...I must admit, I envy Kirishima-san.”

“Huh?” His shoulders slumped, and he blinked at Iokawa’s words, delivered with a sigh.

“Who wouldn’t? With the way you obviously feel about him...how much you cherish him...”

“Iokawa-san...” Perhaps this was the real Iokawa speaking now. After being dumped by his girlfriend, he must have realized that he lacked something, and then been attracted by Yokozawa, with whom he’d happened to interact frequently. It wasn’t that his feelings for Yokozawa hadn’t been genuine, only that he’d been desperate to fill in the emptiness in his heart, thus explaining his strange fixation.

Coupling that with his obvious sense of respect for Kirishima, then it would have been a difficult task for Iokawa to make proper sense of his feelings. It seemed Iokawa had needed some time to organize his thoughts as much as Yokozawa had.

“My apologies. For being so stubborn.”

“O—oh, no, that’s...” It was hard to find words to respond when Iokawa was sitting here apologizing. Yokozawa’s own insecurities had been part of the reason Iokawa had refused to give up on him, after all. It was just as Kirishima had told him: all those openings he left made it easy for others to see through him and shake him up.

“...I won’t be speaking with you anymore in private. I’ll delete your address from my contacts as well; that should set everyone at ease, right?” Iokawa whipped out his cell phone and showed Yokozawa his sincerity in deleting his information. “Oh but...if we should have

the chance to work together in a professional sense, I'd...appreciate it if you'd treat me as just another salesman." With that, he stood as if he'd shaken off his worries. "I wish you all the best," he delivered with finality, and without so much as a backward glance, he walked away. Yokozawa watched his stiff, straight form in silence until he'd disappeared.

"...Everything settled, then?" He whipped around to find that Kirishima had drawn up beside him, a plastic bag hanging from one hand. Perhaps he'd snuck out to check on Yokozawa under the guise of a grocery run.

While there was a limit to how worried it was appropriate for him to be, Yokozawa had to give him props for not revealing himself until Iokawa had taken his leave. "...Yeah, I guess so." Standing abruptly, he felt a dull pain lance through his hips, the lingering effects of pushing himself too hard two nights before. He probably ought to put another warm compress on.

"So...what'd you say to him?"

"...None of your business."

"How so? C'mon, that's not fair, him getting to hear and not me!" Yokozawa was in no mood to fuel Kirishima's ego just now, though, and it hadn't been something he would've been comfortable saying to Kirishima himself in the first place. It was embarrassing enough just remembering what he'd said.

"Fine—I guess I could let you know on the verge of death."

"Wait—*which one of us?*"

"Going by age, probably you first."

"Hey, you don't know that. Once we hit a hundred, the age difference won't really matter."

"A *hundred*—just how long do you plan on living...?"

"Mmm, good question... I've gotta at *least* stick around til you go full-on *dere* and lose that *tsun*."

Yokozawa had never known that Kirishima harbored such aspirations, but it was the very definition of 'waiting in vain'. "Well that day's never gonna come."

"How do you know? You might just find yourself completely and utterly lovestruck and fawning one of these days."

“...Ugh, don’t make me imagine such a disgusting future.” He didn’t think even a hit to the head would make him act like *that*. No, this was nothing more than Kirishima’s strange, idle fantasies.

He glanced up to the sky where the stars were just beginning to twinkle...and let out a loud sigh.

Short ~ Scary Stories

“Aah, that was really scary! I think the hotel story was the scariest—what about you?”

“You think? I thought the one about the village was a lot scarier.”

Yokozawa and Hiyori were currently exchanging opinions on the scary summer story television special they’d just finished watching. It was a short, omnibus drama that had had Hiyori screeching in fright and hiding behind Yokozawa or clutching Sorata close at times, but she’d hung on to the very end.

“Oh—so that scary story special you two were watching is over now?” Kirishima remarked, wandering into the living room fresh from the bath and mopping his hair dry with a towel.

“You should’ve watched with us, Dad! It was scary—but really good!”

The division of labor on days when Yokozawa spent the night tended to involve him and Hiyori preparing dinner while Kirishima handled the clean-up. While Kirishima took care of things in the kitchen, Yokozawa would look over Hiyori’s school work or occasionally settle in to watch a television program with her. Hiyori usually took her bath first, but the order had switched this evening since they’d been caught up watching the scary story special.

“Did you actually manage to even look at the screen? You probably watched huddled behind Yokozawa, didn’t you?”

“I only hid for a *little* bit!” she responded hotly, embarrassed to have her actions so easily pointed out. While she claimed it had only been ‘for a little bit’, though, she’d spent a good half of the program using Yokozawa as a shield, being sure to confirm ...*Is it still a scary part?*, but Yokozawa chose to keep quiet about this out of respect for her honor.

“Yeah yeah—well hurry and hop in the bath. Summer break’s ending soon, so no more late nights burning the midnight oil.”

“Eh? A bath...?” The panicked expression that washed over her face was because the hotel story in the program they’d just watched

had involved a scene in the bathroom—with figures popping up in the mirror and water from the showerhead changing colors. These were pretty standard spooky phenomena—but it seemed she'd been unsettled nonetheless.

“What? Scared to take a bath alone, now?”

“I—I'm not scared!” She was clearly uneasy at having him once again hit the nail on the head, though.

“Well that's what you get for watching some spooky story show. If you're so scared—want your old man to sleep with you tonight? Or do you think you can make it to the bathroom on your own if you wake up in the middle of the night?”

Hiyori put up a strong front in the face of her leering father. “I'm gonna have Sora-chan sleep with me, so I don't need you! I'm taking my bath now!”

“Be sure to call for us immediately if you see any ghosts popping up!”

“We don't *have* any ghosts here!” And with her cheeks puffed out in irritation at her father's attempts to scare her, she left the living room.

“That kid's so cute, I swear...”

“Go too far and she's gonna hate you.” Yokozawa agreed that she was indeed adorable, but he couldn't condone such merciless teasing.

“Nah, it's fine; I know when to pull back. So—what kind of stories did they talk about?”

“There was one scene with some strange happenings in an old hotel, and then when the victims went back later, they learned that the hotel had been torn down long ago...and then another with a strange disease that overtook a village deep in the mountains, and a curse that spread through the internet.”

“Ugh, so cliched.”

“Those kinds of stories wouldn't be nearly as scary if they *weren't* at least a little cliched. The stories themselves were pretty run-of-the-mill, but the production values were pretty impressive.” They probably would've been even more impactful on a big screen, like in a movie theater. The actors had been on top of their game, and even Yokozawa had been a bit spooked by one scene where a group chased down one of the main characters.

“Damn—if I’d known it was gonna be *that* good I would’ve liked to have seen it myself.”

“It was pretty scary, though.”

“Did Hiyo actually manage to watch it, then?”

“No comment.”

“That’s as good as answering, you realize? Boo—and here I thought I might have an excuse to sleep with her for the first time in a while.”

“She’s hardly that young anymore,” he snorted, amused at Kirishima’s dejected sigh. Hiyo was already in fifth grade; scared though she might have been, she was too old now to sleep with her father.

“She’s finally getting to that age where a daughter starts to drift apart from her father...”

“Guess her father’ll have to put some space between himself and his kid, too, then.” Given that he was always the one bearing the brunt of Kirishima’s teasing, Yokozawa was only too happy to take the opportunity for some payback while Kirishima was depressed by thoughts of his daughter. Poking a little fun wouldn’t hurt, at least.

Before Yokozawa could get another comment in, though, Kirishima came back with an unexpected, “All right, guess there’s nothing to be done for it—I’ll sleep with you instead.”

“How the hell did you come to *that* conclusion?!”

“Well—you said yourself that it was scary. I’ll help you to the toilet, too, if you need it.”

“I think I’ll be *just fine*. The ‘scary’ comment was from an *objective* perspective, not a suggestion that *I* was spooked.”

“...Oh. What the hell did you go and get my hopes up for, then?”

“I *wasn’t*.” He *really* wished Kirishima would stop parsing his comments however he pleased.

“Damn...I really should have watched too, then...” he reflected, ignoring Yokozawa’s protests.

“Huh? Why?” It was strange how he regretful he seemed.

“Because then I could’ve claimed to be scared and gotten you to sleep with me.”

“...You are *definitely* too old for that.” He wanted to believe it was merely a joke, but this was Kirishima; there was always the chance he

was actually serious, and humoring him only made you look all the more foolish.

“You *sure* you don’t need me to sleep with you?”

“If you find yourself longing for a bed partner, go and find Sorata.”

“You may say that now...but I’d better not catch you pitching a jealous fit over it later.”

“*As if*,” he snapped, but when he met Kirishima’s gaze, the man was grinning widely. He’d wound up once again playing right into Kirishima’s hand, and while he silently promised himself *One of these days...just you wait*, such a day seemed very far away indeed.

THE END

Chapter 10

“Damn, it’s starting to come down huh...”

On his way back to the office from his lunch break, rain had started falling in little droplets—likely a forewarning of the typhoon bearing down on the region. It was apparently a pretty big storm, and all of the news outlets were delivering warnings to their viewers, with the weather forecast announcing that the storm would reach its peak late that evening.

This, coupled with the strong gusts he’d been battling since that morning, made it feel well and truly like a storm was approaching. Yokozawa was starting to regret leaving without an umbrella that morning, but it probably wouldn’t have done him much good with all this wind anyway.

Breaking into a jog as he approached the office, hoping to beat the rain, he nearly bumped into someone who’d been exiting the building at the same time. “Oh, I’m so sorry, please ex—ah...”

“Yokozawa?” His unfortunate victim, standing there in the open automatic doors, was Kirishima—who’d only avoided a collision by smoothly slipping out of the way just before they ran into one another. “Watch it; didn’t they teach you not to run in the halls?”

“This isn’t a *hall*, and—where are you going?”

“Lunch break. Thought I’d pick something up before the weather got nasty.”

“It’s already coming down,” he reminded, bursting Kirishima’s bubble. The only reason he’d been running here in the first place had been because of the rain.

“Seriously? Shit—and me without an umbrella...” The glass of the automatic doors at the front entry way was peppered with droplets blown about by the wind, giving off an irregular sound. The storm hadn’t begun in earnest yet, but in another hour or so, it would really start pouring.

“The wind’s too strong for an umbrella anyway; you might be able to get off easy if you head out now, though?” It’d probably be

easier to just make a break for it than to walk slowly being buffeted about by the wind anyway.

“Nah, it’s too much of a pain to go outside now...”

“Huh? Then what’re you gonna do about lunch?”

“I’m full to bursting just from seeing your lovely face.”

“Yeah yeah, enough with the sleeptalk, get going.” There was no reason for him to babble that sort of crap here of all places; he just could *not* keep his mouth shut, it seemed.

“Man, what am I gonna do... I don’t wanna get wet...” Kirishima mused, his arms crossed, and Yokozawa reflected silently that he should just go *now* instead of wasting time *thinking* about going.

“If you’re gonna whine so much about not wanting to get wet, then hail a cab.”

“Even if I tried that, it’s not like one’s just gonna appear out of thin air in this weath—ooh, there’s one now!”

Yokozawa turned to follow Kirishima’s gaze, only to see a taxi had pulled up to the front entrance with almost *eerie* timing. The passenger paid his fare and exited the cab—then headed right for them.

Yokozawa opened his mouth to ask Kirishima if he shouldn’t take the now-empty taxi himself—but Kirishima had turned his attentions instead to the man who’d just stepped through the automatic doors. “Yasuda?!”

“...Hm?”

“Damn, it feels like it’s been ages! How many months since we last met?”

“Hey there, Kirishima. Guess it’s been three, four months? What’re you doing around here?” the man returned, expression relatively even throughout the exchange. He seemed friendly with Kirishima, and the employee badge he held in his hand seemed to suggest he was a Marukawa Shoten employee, but Yokozawa had never seen him before.

“I could ask you the same thing. I figured wild horses couldn’t drag you into the office.”

“Hey, it’s not like I *want* to be here, but the president himself called me up and said if I didn’t show my face around these parts now and then, he’d can me.”

“So you *finally* got told, did ya? But even so, surely you didn’t have to come in on the day of a *typhoon*, right?”

“Just my bad luck that the day I said I’d be here happened to be today. I’ve been really off my game lately...” the man named Yasuda reflected glumly, shoulders slumping slightly. Yet Yokozawa still found himself captivated less by the clearly affected gesture—and more by the exquisite good looks of the man doing it.

His glossy black hair was so skillfully set it looked like a wig, and the frameless glasses perched atop a slender nose—far from *hiding* the graceful shape of his face—actually *accentuated* it. He seemed about as tall as Yokozawa but gave off the complete opposite impression from the rather intimidating Yokozawa. In fact, he seemed to have an air about him that more closely resembled Kirishima.

If such an attractive man were to hang around the office, there was no doubt he’d instantly become the focus of gossip among the women of the building. And yet Yokozawa still had absolutely no recollection of meeting the man before.

“Well we’ll be done with our work on the anime soon, which means the next project will start up shortly after, so I’m planning on pounding out the budget while I’m here.”

“*Next* project? When did that get the green light?”

“When was it... Quite a while back—I’ve honestly forgotten now! Oh—right, the first volume will be done soon.”

“About time! How’s it looking?” It seemed they’d shifted now from discussion of the present state of affairs to more general work topics. Yokozawa could see no visible end to the conversation, the atmosphere between the two clearly that of old friends.

“Heh, who do you think you’re talking to? I’m the one who made it, so it’s *perfect*, of course! Oh, but...who do we have here? One of your lackeys?”

Yokozawa had been sitting there gaping stupidly at the pair as they spoke, having no opportunity to get a word in edgewise even if he’d wanted to, and grew flustered when the conversation was suddenly turned his way. “Oh—no, I’m not a subordinate...”

He always panicked when asked to describe his relationship with Kirishima; in the workplace, Kirishima was technically a superior, but

because they were in different divisions, he wasn't really Yokozawa's boss. If the person asking had been someone uninvolved in their work, he could've probably explained their relationship as that of friendly sempai-kouhai, but even that didn't quite cover it.

"Oh right—you two haven't met, have you? This is Yokozawa from Sales; he's known as the 'Wild Bear'—so surely you've heard of him?"

Yokozawa didn't quite approve of being introduced like *that* to someone who'd never met him before—especially when he'd lately been working on not having such a sharp, gruff attitude.

"Ah, yeah, I've heard of you. Everyone says you've got some great sales instincts. So that's you, huh? I'm Yasuda—I make anime." He delivered his introduction with a smile, the corners of his lips lifting, and when he offered Yokozawa a business card, Yokozawa took it out of habit—and then his eyes widened when he took one look at the name on the card.

Yasuda Gou, the greatest, most sought-after anime producer in the entire company. Yokozawa was more than familiar with both the man's name as well as his work, but it was the first time he'd ever spoken with the man. He seemed more phantom than human, cloistering himself away on projects and rarely showing his face in the office. He hated being around other people, and since he rarely showed up at official functions, Yokozawa had never even seen a *picture* of the man.

"Surely you've heard of this guy, right? He's the producer of the *Za Kan* series. We joined up about the same time, but he hardly ever comes into the office. You know, you're kind of an urban legend around here."

"How rude! I'm working myself to the bone for the good of this company, I'll have you know." Being a contemporary of Kirishima's would put the man in his mid 30s, then—but while their business was full of people who didn't really look their age, Yasuda seemed *particularly* younger than what Yokozawa assumed his age to be.

With his looks, he could easily pass for early 20s, but he carried himself with an air that none of the newbie recruits could have pulled

off. Perhaps this was what people meant when they said someone was 'charismatic'.

Kirishima's comment about Yasuda being little more than an urban legend hadn't been overstatement, though. Indeed, everything Yokozawa had ever heard about Yasuda had been so far-fetched he'd been hard-pressed to believe it.

"Yeah, but your 'for the good of the company' just translates to 'for the good of yourself', right? You refuse to take on any projects you don't find interesting!"

"Hey, the company still winds up making a profit in the end, so it's fine! And it's not that I only take on projects I find interesting, it's that I only take on those that I find *worthy* of doing."

"Still as brimming with confidence as ever, I see. Though I guess that's what makes you *you*."

"You're the last person I want to hear *that* from." They laughed as they sniped at one another, each clearly acknowledging the other's talents, and while Yokozawa wouldn't go so far as to say it made him feel left out, it still felt a bit like he had no place here.

"That reminds me—is it true there's gonna be a new character appearing in *Za Kan*? You've gotta tell me these things in advance! We've still got the TV anime to do after the movie comes out—and now I'll have to rethink the flow of things."

"Hell no, there's no new characters. Who told you that?"

"The company president."

"I guess I mentioned in a meeting at one point that there might be an opportunity for new characters to crop up in the future, but when the hell did it become a done deal?" He'd probably just let his imagination run wild when Kirishima had brought up talk of future happenings. Isaka—the president of Marukawa Shoten—was a rather creative sort, and bold as well, and Yokozawa looked up to him, but his way of getting carried away with things was one of his few flaws. Those around him very often got caught up in his hare-brained schemes, and the company-wide fair they were preparing for at the moment had been all Isaka's idea.

Plans were proceeding nicely, but they could do little more than simply pray that no wrenches were thrown into the works. The more

people involved in a project, the more likely it became that someone would screw up somewhere. Even something as simple as a missed call could lead to a huge cock-up, so Yokozawa couldn't rest for even a moment, seeing as he was in charge of everything.

The literature division which had been their only major bottleneck so far finally seemed to be easing up, so it might be best to just stick with the plan he'd started with, but if Yokozawa didn't work to keep everyone in line, they'd never be able to pull this off. Counting off in his head the issues he still needed to get taken care of, he felt a sharp pain forming in the pit of his stomach.

"—right, Yokozawa?"

"...Huh? Oh, sorry—I wasn't listening." His thoughts dispersed as he was drawn unwittingly into the conversation.

Kirishima started to repeat his question—before his brows drew together. "Hey, are you feeling okay? What'd you have for lunch?"

At the concerned gaze directed his way, Yokozawa realized he'd been massaging his midsection. "It's just a bit of a stomachache." Which wasn't entirely a lie, though the source of the unease wasn't his lunch. He'd been able to wolf down pretty much anything in his younger years without experiencing any ill effects, but it seemed he was no match for stress.

"I *thought* the Wild Bear was being unusually quiet today—but I see it's just an upset stomach."

"As I said, I'm *not* that."

"Well, so long as you're not just being shy. Which reminds me—why are you and Kirishima here so close?"

"Huh?" The question came utterly out of the blue, and Yokozawa blinked stupidly. What had made him ask that?

"Ah—let me rephrase, I was just wondering what brought you two together. You're in different divisions, and there's an age gap as well—and yet you seem really close."

Yokozawa felt a shudder ripple through him at the rather innocent question. It was true enough that, initially, people had found it strange for them to be around each other, but most seemed to have grown accustomed to it by now, such that no one really noticed nowadays.

"Oh, well—I mean, I'm in charge of comics sales, so..." And that was, truthfully, the only point of connection he'd had with Kirishima before. They'd only ever interacted in meetings and briefings, never going out drinking or anything like that.

Perhaps his unease had shown on his face, for Yasuda pressed even further, "And...that's all?"

"Wh—what are you trying to say? There's really no particular reason..."

"Really?"

"I'd certainly like to know why you're being so persistent in asking!"

"Because I'm curious."

"I'm afraid I don't follow." Yokozawa felt his hackles rising at Yasuda's poor manners, and despite knowing he needed to do something about the way his temper flared so easily, he didn't see that happening today.

"Well, I mean—you two are an item, right?"

".....?!" The color immediately fled his face at Yasuda's comment. It hadn't been a question—more a confirmation of something he clearly already understood to be true.

Yokozawa's mind went blank at the suddenness, and Kirishima confirmed smoothly, "Ooh, so you realized, did you?"

"I knew it! Looks like I've still got it. Oh—sorry, I've gotta run. If I'm late today, they'll toss me out on my ass for sure."

"Well hang in there and try not to let the nit-picking get to you."

"Leave it to me—I'm used to it!" And with a wave of his hand, Yasuda headed for the elevator.

"Oh yeah, Yasuda—let's get drinks sometime soon. I should have some time after we get a working print of Volume 1 rolling."

"Sure, if I feel like it."

Blankly watching as Yasuda left, Yokozawa made an effort to organize his thoughts before breaking out into a full-fledged panic. It seemed he was the only one taking this seriously. "Oi, what the hell do you think you were *doing*, admitting to it?!" Even though Yasuda twiggling to their relationship had been seemingly unavoidable,

Yokozawa couldn't fathom what on earth had made Kirishima so casually acknowledge it.

"Nah, it's fine. Don't sweat it. He's not the type to go blabbing about it. You can trust him."

But whether the man was trustworthy or not was *not* the issue here. "That's not what I was—"

"Ah, looks like the rain's letting up a little. I'm gonna head out to try and make a dash for some lunch. Good luck with work!"

"Hey—*wait!*" But the hand he reached out grabbed onto nothing, hanging sadly in mid-air. Kirishima darted out the front doors, leaving Yokozawa standing alone in the entryway.

"Are you not going home yet, Yokozawa-san?" Henmi called out a bit worriedly, having just finished his own preparations to leave.

"I'll go after I've finished with this. You go on."

"All right then, I'll be taking my leave first! You should try not to stay too late."

"Yeah yeah, I know. Take care heading home." He didn't bother looking up from the computer screen, sending Henmi off with words alone.

He released a quiet sigh, the sales floor now silent. The reason he hadn't made much progress today was because he was still hung up on what Yasuda had mentioned earlier that afternoon.

"You two are an item, right?"

It hadn't sounded like teasing, just pointing out the obvious—yet his heart had felt like it was going to stop in his chest, all the same.

Given how confident Kirishima had seemed about the matter, he supposed the man could be trusted, but most *normal* people wouldn't just blurt out a comment on so delicate a matter. Still—that wasn't what he was worried about, really.

What concerned him most...was *himself*.

Only a short while ago, Iokawa had also twigged to his relationship with Kirishima, and that compounded with this now made him worry...if perhaps he was just *that* easy to read. That two people in a row, now, had picked up on their relationship...*strongly* suggested

there was some deeper reason at play. Perhaps Yasuda had noted a change in Kirishima after seeing him for the first time in a while, or maybe there had been something in the atmosphere between himself and Kirishima.

“.....”

He likely wouldn't be able to solve this mystery without speaking to the man himself, as Yokozawa was clearly not going to get anywhere stewing over this himself. And yet, when might he possibly run into Yasuda again? This was the first time he'd met the man since he'd started working at Marukawa, after all, which meant it might be *years* before they met again.

“What the hell am I gonna do...” he muttered to himself.

He saved the files he'd just finished working on and glanced up, realizing that he was now completely alone on the sales floor. He'd thought it had gotten quiet, but it seemed this was merely a product of everyone else going home for the day. All of the lights aside from that on his own workspace had already been doused. It was here that he recalled that all employees had been urged to head home early in advance of the incoming typhoon.

A glance at the clock showed that a fair amount of time had passed since Henmi had left. He'd probably wasted more time lost in his thoughts than actually doing any work, when he thought about it.

He looked out the window, seeing that the weather had grown quite a bit fouler than he'd expected it to, and the rain slapping against the window panes blurred the form of the buildings across the way. The wind howled like the cry of some wild animal from far away.

He opened an internet browser to check the status, only to find that several train lines and roads had already been closed down. His own train line that would take him home had been one of the first to go, apparently. He doubted he'd be able to easily hail a taxi in this weather, and even if he tried to take the long way home tonight, it would be no easy trip. He'd completely lost his chance to make it home this evening.

“Guess there's no helping it. I'll have to stay the night here.” He'd suffer no damage from not being able to take a bath for *one* evening, and it wouldn't be his first time spending the night at the office. When

he'd first started out, he'd burned the midnight oil on several occasions in preparation for events. In fact, he was sure he still had a blanket tucked away somewhere here, and as he stood to go and search for it, his phone began ringing.

He glanced at the caller ID, then answered. "Yes, this is Yokozawa."

"I heard you stayed at the office pretty late—did you manage to make it home okay?"

It seemed Kirishima had called him up out of worry; his overattentiveness had initially been uncomfortable, rendering Yokozawa unable to accept it without protest, but now he actually felt relatively at ease in dealing with this side of the man.

"No, I'm still at the office."

"You mean you haven't left yet?!" Kirishima was clearly not happy with Yokozawa's response, probably not having expected it. Truthfully though, Yokozawa hadn't intended on staying this late himself.

"Sorry—I kind of missed my chance to make a break for it." It was all he could really say, and while he knew it made him sound like an idiot, it was the truth.

If Sorata had still been in his apartment, he probably would have gone to great lengths in order to make it home, but at least with the Kirishimas watching over Sorata now, he didn't have to worry about that.

"So what're you gonna do? The trains are all stopped now, you realize."

"I'd probably wind up having to cool my heels somewhere, even if I left now, so I'm just going to stay here. One night won't hurt anything." Here inside the office, he wouldn't have chance to meet with any unfortunate accidents, and while it wasn't the ideal location for resting, it was enough to be out of the rain.

"...Good grief, guess there's no helping it then. Just be a good boy and wait patiently, then."

And with that, Kirishima cut the line, leaving only an artificial digital buzz. "...What the heck was that?" "Be a good boy and wait?" What did that mean? He wasn't some unruly child, so there was no chance of him rushing out into the storm or anything like that.

Stretching his neck, he returned his focus to the rest of his work. If he could just finish up the documents he had before him, then everything else would come together smoothly, and reminding himself not to waste time thinking about things that didn't matter at the moment, he forced himself to focus on his computer before him.

His concentration snapped next because of the gurgling of his stomach, reminding him loudly that he hadn't eaten in some time—not since lunch.

“—“

It would be cruel to order take-out in this weather. He'd often ordered delivery curry in the past; the shop he and his coworkers had often patronized used large portions of ingredients and was quick to deliver, so it had easily become a favorite.

“I'm starving...”

“Yeah, I figured you would be—which is why I brought you a snack.”

“—?!” He'd meant the comment to be directed to himself and nearly leapt from his chair when someone actually *responded*—turning to find Kirishima standing before him. “Wh—what the hell are you doing here?!” His clothing was rather casual, given that he'd already headed home for the day.

An umbrella glistening with drops of water hung from one hand, and the fabric of his clothes had changed colors where the rain had soaked through. His hair, damp and ruffled, must have been annoying him, for he shook his head lightly as he complained, “Ugh, I *hate* getting wet...”



He slipped the umbrella he held into a stand by the door, pulling from a picnic bag a towel he must have brought from home and wiping his head vigorously with it.

“Then why the hell did you come all the way back to the office? If you forgot something, I’m sure it could’ve waited til tomorrow.”

“Idiot, I came to get *you*, since you said you couldn’t make it home.” Which meant his earlier admonition to ‘be a good boy and wait patiently’ had been code for ‘I’m coming to get you, so wait for me.’

“...I *told* you I was going to stay the night here!”

“But won’t you be lonely, all by yourself?”

“I’m not a *child*. And what about Hiyo?”

“She’s at home.”

“You mean you asked your mother to watch her again?” Hiyo understood well enough that her father had to work, but didn’t they need some father-daughter time together now and then? And on top of that, there was the evening’s weather; she might be feeling lonely without her father around on such a stormy night.

“She was going to come over tonight anyway. Said something about discussing Hiyo’s costume.”

“Costume?”

“There’s something going on for Halloween, I think.” Which reminded Yokozawa—Halloween was coming up at the end of the month, an event that had somehow become rather common in Japan of late. While it was mostly used for *commercial* benefits by businesses, there were some places where parades were held, and theme parks and such often allowed visitors to wear costumes on that day alone.

Japanese people seemed to love taking all sorts of things and turning them around into fun events, and there was no mistaking the fact that children would *love* the opportunity to dress up in costumes and receive candy. He wondered what sort of costume Hiyo planned on wearing.

“And you don’t need to be involved in those discussions?”

“Hey, the sponsor shouldn’t stick his nose in where it doesn’t belong.”

“See, you *say* those kinds of things, but really you just don’t want to be around when girls are gabbing, right?”

“Well I *guess* you could put it like that, if you wanted to. I really don’t want them asking me for advice, after all. But damn—this rain’s not letting up, is it...”

“Not like we can help it; it’s a *typhoon*. It’ll probably keep up like this until morning.” The weather report he’d checked earlier had said it was slowing down since making landfall in the Kantou region where they were situated, and while sunny skies were supposed to return by the next morning, the report had urged viewers not to go outside that night.

“Wonder if it’d be a bad idea trying to head home in the car...”

“Well, we should probably at least wait a bit and see how things pan out.” It wasn’t like they couldn’t make it home now, but heavy rain would make it difficult to see the road, and the gusts might bring debris their way as well.

“Guess we might have to make an all-nighter of it then...”

“Which is why you shouldn’t have come.”

“...Well I was kind of worried about you.”

“Huh?”

“You’re hung up on Yasuda finding out about us, aren’t you?”

“!!” Yokozawa fell silent, words fleeing him at having Kirishima hit his worries right on the nose. Their conversation earlier had barely lasted three minutes—which meant Kirishima had realized something was off about him in that small span of time.

Kirishima slowly settled into a seat at Yokozawa’s side. “...I knew it. I *thought* it was weird of you to space out for so long you actually forgot to head home.”

“No one said I was *spacing out*.”

“Well, you *were*, weren’t you? Otherwise there’s no way you wouldn’t be able to finish your work and not be able to make it home on a day like this.”

“.....” Yokozawa had nothing to say in the face of such sharp logic, frustrated that he could never manage to put on a cool face in front of someone like Kirishima.

“Seriously, though, you don’t have to worry about him; he mentioned it because he noticed, that’s all, I’m sure he had no other ulterior motive. But—if it’ll make you feel better, I’ll make it a point to remind him not to spread it around. So just—think of it as nothing more than an inconsiderate comment?”

“...You really must be close with him.” He seemed to have the utmost faith in Yasuda. Coworkers of the same age in a company were often like fellow soldiers on the battlefield, so it wasn’t like Yokozawa couldn’t understand their bond, but...he somehow didn’t feel right about it.

“...Jealous?”

“I—I said *no* such thing!”

“Aah, I see how it is now, yup. You’re jealous, got it.”

“I said that’s *not* the deal!” But try as he might to deny it, he had to admit in a tiny corner of his mind that that wasn’t entirely true. Still, it wasn’t his way to just own up to the accusation.

“You really ought to try being more honest with yourself.”

“Shut up... The thing that was bugging me...was *me*.” They’d never get through this conversation sniping back and forth like this, so Yokozawa took the initiative in confessing what he’d spent the entire day worrying over. He hadn’t wanted to do it—feeling it was pitiful to be the first to break in this instance—but it was better than keeping his mouth shut and having Kirishima grill him on all manner of points.

“...What are you talking about?”

“It wasn’t just Yasuda-san today; just recently Iokawa-san also realized that we were dating, remember? It just...made me worried that maybe I’m doing something, or acting in some way...that makes it really obvious.”

“Ah...” Kirishima made a sour face, as if he’d been considering precisely the same thing.

“So—what do you think made him realize?”

“Not really sure... I’ve never really understood it myself, but he can be damn sharp sometimes. You can’t keep anything from him.”

“I see...”

“But—on that note, I do honestly feel like it’s something I need to work on. I’ll try and be more careful.”

“I’d appreciate it.” While they hadn’t exactly solved the problem per se, it was still progress for Kirishima to say that he would reflect on his actions. He’d been going too far lately, so Yokozawa was relieved to hear that he’d pay more attention to their surroundings from now on.

“Oh right—let’s dig in. Here, I brought food.” In the cute little lunch bag that Kirishima handed him were four small *onigiri*, with a *tamagoyaki* and a weiner shaped like an octopus with notched-out eyes stuffed into a little box.

“...You’re *not* gonna try and tell me that *you* made—”

“Hell no. *Hiyo* made these, saying she felt bad for you since you were probably hungry. She made the *tamagoyaki* too, by the way.”

“*Hiyo*...made this for me?” His chest warmed with emotion at the thought of her consideration for him. The small size of the *onigiri* must have been because of the tiny hands that made them, and just imagining her making them filled him with fond emotion. As he took up one of the *onigiri*, encased in wrapping, he could feel that they were still slightly warm.

“You’d better be grateful to me too, coming all the way in this hellish weather to bring you something to snack on while I picked you up.

“...I am. Grateful, that is. Thank you.” He’d been shocked, yes, but not unappreciative by a long shot, and he suspected experiencing this mishmash of emotions had been what prompted him to deliver such curt responses.

“You’re quite welcome. But man, those look tasty. Gimme one.”

“You haven’t eaten yet?”

“I did, but seeing these *onigiri* has me hungry again.”

He passed one to Kirishima—who finished it off in two quick bites. They were all so tiny that the remaining three soon disappeared into Yokozawa’s stomach. They attacked the *tamagoyaki* and weiner together, and in just five short minutes, their evening snack time had ended. Still, it had been enough to ease Yokozawa’s hunger pangs for now.

“That was delicious; tell *Hiyo* I loved the meal.”

“Tell her yourself; you’re coming by tomorrow after all, aren’t you? Ah—you have a grain of rice on you...”

“Where?” He must’ve really been famished and attacked his meal.

“The right side of your mouth—no, not there, from where I’m looking. Ugh, forget it, I’ll get it for you.”

"I can do it myself—?!" But rather than reaching out to remove the rice with his hand, he slipped forward, so close he could have stolen a kiss, and before Yokozawa could scramble away, he brushed his lips softly against the side of Yokozawa's mouth.

"...Did I *seriously* have anything on my face?"

"You did, you did! What, am I *really* that hard to trust, Yokozawa?"

"Yes." His flighty defense certainly wasn't helping matters, either. Why did this man always have to adopt such a frivolous attitude when it came to important matters? But then, he thought back.

Yokozawa was the type where, if he were *seriously* seduced, with no chance to object or make snide remarks, he would find the situation unbearable—so perhaps that had been Kirishima's aim after all. Either way, he still wound up on the defensive.

"Y'know, I was just thinking...now would be a good opportunity to do it...but I guess it's not happening."

"Do what?"

"Office sex."

"Do it *yourself*...!" He released a loud sigh at yet another of Kirishima's hare-brained suggestions.

"It'd be kind of hard to do it by myself, though. C'mon, there's no one around, and it's just dim enough to really set the mood. How about it?"

"No chance. Besides, what if the security cameras caught us?"

"Nah, it's fine; they only record the entrances and exits. So long as we don't get frisky in the doorway, we won't get caught."

"Well there's not gonna *be* any 'getting frisky.'"

"Oh I think there might be."

"That's not something to go around boasting."

"Just think about it—we're the *only two* people left in this whole building, on the night of a huge typhoon. Our conversation distracts us from the weather, and little by little we get closer and closer... It's a waste of the situation for *nothing* to happen!"

Yokozawa groped for a response in the face of such emphatic pleading. "You've been reading too much manga."

"What's wrong with a manga editor reading too much manga?"

“I never said there was anything *wrong* with it, I’m just saying I want no part in it!” It was nice how Kirishima was so positive-thinking, trying to make the most of any situation he found himself in, but he could be so single-minded in his efforts that it exhausted anyone dragged along for the ride.

“I at least deserve a *reward* for coming all the way out here in the middle of a storm to bring you a snack, don’t I?”

“*Huh?*” Yokozawa’s brows furrowed at the unexpected word.

“You know, a reward. But fine, have it your way—I’ll settle for a peck on the cheek.” And with that, he presented his cheek, tapping it insistently as if to say *pucker up*. At Yokozawa’s reflexive sour expression, Kirishima slumped his shoulders for show. “Aww, and here I am, charging to your rescue, risking life and limb. My lover sure can play it cool. What I wouldn’t give just *once* to enjoy some sweet reward...”

“Quit your whining; all I have to do is *do it*, right?” With that, he kicked at the carpet to slide himself, chair and all, closer, Kirishima froze in shock at the sudden movement.



Yokozawa reached out and buried his fingers in Kirishima's hair—and then proceeded to plunder his lips with a violent kiss. A kiss on the cheek would've been even more embarrassing than a normal one, after all, and this way, he could ensure that Kirishima offered no

needless backtalk. "...Satisfied?" he mumbled, finally releasing the lips he'd forcibly stolen—but he wasn't about to get off scot-free, it seemed.

"...Not by far."

"Ngh—?!" Two hands came up to brace his head, returning the passionate kiss, and after he'd had his way with Yokozawa's lips, Kirishima slipped a tongue inside, where it writhed and wriggled like a living creature with its own agenda. It sought out his own tongue within his mouth, and Yokozawa felt his mind freeze up, going numb. "*Hum...nnm...!*"

Not just his tongue, but his whole *mouth* felt on fire, and a flush ran through him from head to toe, making him feel as if he were coming down with a fever. In Yokozawa's hesitation over whether to mount further protest or not, Kirishima had taken the inch he'd been given and proceeded to run with it.

His hips were starting to shudder with need, but he knew if he let himself get swept away now, he'd just be playing right into Kirishima's hand. Going any further than this would *not* be a good idea.

"That...that's *enough*..." He pried Kirishima off of himself and sliced him through with a glare—but received in return a playful response delivered with the most serious of expressions.

"...Yeah, we *definitely* need to do it now. Office sex."

"No way in *hell*. You great *idiot*." His growled shout echoed lifelessly throughout the empty office. It was clear now that he was going to be fending off Kirishima for the rest of the night.

"This is some fine weather."

"...It is, at that..." As usual, the sunny skies following a typhoon were a sight to behold. The sky was endlessly serene today, and it looked like perfect laundry weather. While the air had a bit of chill to it, that only made the weather feel all the more pleasant.

Just like my heart now—he might have liked to say, but that wasn't happening. While he'd made impressive strides toward resolving his issues regarding his future with Kirishima, it didn't mean he no longer cared what others thought about him now.

Dropping by Kirishima's apartment like this was starting to become an everyday occurrence, and yet he couldn't help thinking in a small, secret corner of his mind...that he really ought to cut down on how often he came by. But Kirishima had been firm in his intentions to see Yokozawa home, which left him with little choice but to go along.

"...I said I was going *home*..."

"Yeah, but my place counts as one of your homes, right?"

"....." While he appreciated the thought, he wasn't naive enough to accept it happily. Granted, even though they couldn't broadcast their relationship publicly, they weren't doing anything *wrong*, and being overly secretive about things would only draw even more unwanted attention.

Still, the more he tried to affect a neutral attitude, the more awkward things became, and it was times like this that he hated how inept he was in such matters.

"Ah, good morning!"

"Kitagawa-san, good morning." The woman who offered the pair a bright greeting as they stepped out of the car was the mother of Yuki, Hiyori's friend. Yokozawa was immediately on guard, being faced with a neighbor so soon upon arriving, and he ducked a head in her direction from behind Kirishima, given that they'd met before on several occasions.

Yuki's mother was a warm woman who seemed rather adept at cooking and making sweets, which had Hiyori taking advantage of her kindness rather often.

"That typhoon yesterday was quite something!"

"Indeed; we couldn't make it home from the office, so here we are dragging ourselves back the morning after!" While Yokozawa knew this was only idle chitchat, he couldn't help being overly sensitive to the way Kirishima phrased things, worried that they might be inviting undue suspicion.

"I see! That must have been quite a trial. Was Hiyori-chan all right, then?"

"My mother was visiting yesterday, so she just wound up spending the night. I'm always managing to find myself indebted to my parents!"

"It must be nice, having them live so nearby. I even find myself doing the same with my own parents! Oh, but—if ever you need anything, please feel free to ask!"

"Thanks always for your help. I must apologize for always relying on you so much this way. I do hope Hiyori isn't causing any problems with the way she drops by from time to time?"

"Not at all, far from it! We're both of us in the same boat, after all. Hiyori-chan is so well-mannered, and Yuki's more proactive with getting her homework done when Hiyori-chan is around."

"I'm glad to hear that, then. I hear that father of hers is quite a lazy slob, so I hope she isn't setting a bad example."

"Come now! You're a fantastic father, Kirishima-san! Though I will admit that lately she's been all about her *Oniichan*."

"Eh?" Yokozawa couldn't help the stupid sound that slipped from his lips when he found the conversation had unexpectedly turned to himself.

"Those madeleines we received the other day—you made those with Hiyori-chan, didn't you?"

"Oh—well, yes." He nodded stiffly at her question.

"They were absolutely delicious! I adored them!"

"O—oh, it was...nothing, really. I'm glad you enjoyed them." He bowed his head in return as she dipped a bow his way. He knew all he needed to do was be as open and confident as he was on the job, but the unexpected nature of the conversation had his unease showing clearly his face.

"I must say I'm quite jealous of Hiyori-chan, being able to prepare sweets with such a cool *oniisan*!"

"Hardly, ma'am!" He knew it was nothing more than flattery, but such straightforward compliments still left him feeling embarrassed.

"Oh my, look at the time! I'm so sorry to have kept you this long."

"Not at all, it's our fault as well for keeping you from your errands."

They exchanged farewells, and after parting ways, Kirishima whispered a reprimand. "You're too damn uptight!"

“Not like I can help it! I didn’t think she’d want to *talk* to me...” He’d hoped to sink silently into the background, but with his build, he supposed that just wasn’t possible.

“Well hey, at least you got called a ‘cool *oniisan*’.”

“That was *clearly* just idle flattery.”

“Even so, it means she’s fond of you, right? You’ll garner more suspicion being all uptight like that; try having a little confidence!”

“I *know*, it’s just...” Maybe he’d been more nervous and sensitive than usual lately. Being confessed to out of the blue when he’d least expected it, having his relationship with Kirishima pointed out—it seemed like a never-ending parade of situations designed to unsettle, provoking his cowardly worrywart side.

But his coming to Kirishima’s place was no longer all that strange—dropping by for dinner, to play with Sorata, to look over Hiyori’s homework. And while Yokozawa himself saw each and every one of these mundane things as something special, something he couldn’t help but *enjoy*, it was far from something he should feel ashamed of.

“...You know, if it’s bugging you so much, why not just ask him?”

“Huh?”

“You’re worried about how you come off, right? If you hear from Yasuda what made him realize we were together, then don’t you think that might go a ways toward easing your concerns?”

Indeed, if he could just figure out what had prompted Yasuda to question the depth of their relationship, it might resolve this whole affair—but it would certainly be no easy task tracking down someone who hardly ever showed his face at the office.

“W—wait, how am I supposed to ask him?”

“Guess you’ll have to trust in fate.”

“Oi!” He felt his irritation with Kirishima rise as the man proceeded to shirk any responsibility in the matter, leaving Yokozawa feeling like he was spinning his wheels in fruitless effort.

“You know, you’re gonna go bald if you keep worrying over crap like this.”

"I'll have you know neither my father *nor* my grandfather have gone bald!" Granted, the fact that he felt compelled to respond to comments like this kind of suggested he *was* worried about it, and heaving a sigh at how easily he'd been played yet again, he craned his neck back to stare up at the sunny skies above.

"Sorry, I'm boarding!" Yokozawa called out, rushing to enter the elevator which had just released some passengers onto the floor of the literature division, where Yokozawa had only moments ago finished his own business. He moved to thank the person who'd kindly held the door for him—when his eyes widened as he took in his fellow passenger. "Ah..."

"Hey there; so we meet again!" Yasuda grinned when he met Yokozawa's eyes. It was the second time they'd met, and the first in a week or so. Truthfully, Yokozawa hadn't expected to meet the man again so soon, given that he seemed more like a ghost than a man.

Maybe this was finally his *chance*.

"Just came from a meeting?"

"Yes; we're just finalizing the details for the upcoming campaign." When a smile graced Yasuda's gorgeous features, it granted him even greater intensity than before, and despite his reputation for strong-arming others, Yokozawa suspected there weren't many around who could possibly turn down any request in the face of a smile like *that*. It wasn't a matter of him being anyone's *type*, more that he was just so *graceful* it came off *intimidating*.

"Which floor? Sales is on 2, right?"

"Oh—yes, thank you." Yasuda pressed the panel at Yokozawa's low-key request, and a silence settled over them. It was times like this that made the trip in the elevator feel interminable, and in an effort to be rid of the awkward tension, he forced himself to speak. "May I...ask you a question?"

"Ask as many as you like," Yasuda responded easily to the hesitant Yokozawa. Kirishima had mentioned that he'd speak to Yasuda himself, so perhaps it wasn't his place to ask this kind of thing, but he might not get a chance to talk to Yasuda again after this, so he couldn't help it.

“...How did you know?”

“Know what? Oh—about you and Kirishima? Sorry about that; we’d only just met and I went and stuck my foot in my mouth, huh? Guess anyone’d freak out if some total stranger said something like that to them.”

“Oh, no that’s...” It wasn’t that he’d wanted Yasuda to apologize; he simply wanted to know how the man had realized what their relationship was. If he could just figure that out, then he’d know what steps to take to ensure it didn’t happen again, and while he didn’t like relying on others, it was inescapable in this situation.

“I’m pretty sharp about those kinds of things. I guess I just realized. Maybe because I’m bi myself, I felt a sense of camaraderie?”

“Huh?” He sensed that Yasuda had just dropped a *huge* bomb, and unsure of how best to respond to Yasuda’s unexpected reply, Yokozawa just sat there blinking stupidly.

“I guess if I had to pick one over the other, I’d say I prefer guys; oh—but don’t worry, Kirishima is *so* not my type. Though you’re not so bad yourself... But I’m not so desperate I’d go after someone who’s already taken.”

“Uh...okay...?” He’d lost any hope of following the thread of conversation now, mind swirling at being bombarded with information he *really* hadn’t wanted to know. At least he’d managed to figure out that Yasuda viewed neither him nor Kirishima as potential romantic conquests. This man probably had a different idea of what constituted ‘common sense’ from Yokozawa.

“Well, here’s the 2nd floor. You’re getting off here, right?”

“Oh—yes.” At Yasuda’s prompting, he wandered off the elevator in a daze. But as he turned back to the elevator, he caught Yasuda flashing him a merry smile as the doors closed.

“See ya later! Looks like you got hooked by a real pain in the ass, but hang in there!” This strange cheer of encouragement merely left Yokozawa feeling all the more confused. Yasuda was even more inexplicable a person than Yokozawa had heard.

“What’s wrong, Yokozawa-san? Standing there lost in thought,” Henmi called out as he passed by, voice tinged with curiosity.

“Huh? Oh, no, it’s nothing. Just spaced out there for a moment.”

“Are you all right? You’ve been rather busy lately, so are you sure you aren’t overworking yourself? We’d be quite stuck if we lost you, after all! Be sure to rest up well when you can and take care of yourself.”

“...So in other words, you’re not worried about *me* so much as your workload?”

At the shocked retort, Henmi grew a bit flustered. “Oh, wait, I mean—of course I’m worried for your own good?!”

“Your true feelings leaked out there for a minute, idiot.” But he couldn’t bring himself to be truly angry with the ever-straightforward Henmi. In fact, he mused that it would be nice if *everyone* were as open and honest as Henmi—but he’d never be that lucky.

“Oh—they did?”

“Good grief, you’re lucky to be able to be so honest...”

“Indeed! It’s my trademark, after all!” Yokozawa couldn’t help the smile that tugged at his lips in response to Henmi’s own broad, unabashed grin. There was no point in beleaguering over things he couldn’t change with mere worries. Things were what they were.

“I’m feeling better now that I’ve seen you.”

“Uh...well, I don’t...really get it, but that’s great!”

“C’mon, let’s get to work.”

“Yes, sir!” And at Henmi’s energetic response, Yokozawa followed him onto the sales floor.

THE END

Short - Halloween

Afternoon tea and snack time today had turned into an affair focusing on Hiyori, who'd just returned from her children's association Halloween party. Recognizing that she'd have filled herself up on candy already, today they were only enjoying some black tea.

"So, did you enjoy the party?"

Hiyori nodded with a bright, full-faced grin at Yokozawa's question. "Yup! It was a lot of fun with everyone all dressed up in costume! And I got a lot of people to take pictures too. They're gonna print them out and bring them later, they said."

The children who'd stopped by the Kirishimas' apartment begging for candy had been decked out in all manner of costumes. Some had been dressed up as witches like Hiyori, while others had posed as ghosts, covered head to toe in a sheet. He supposed this was a rather enjoyable event for children, getting to receive so much candy.

"Looks like you got a boatload of candy, too. Take care not to get any cavities from eating too much, got it?"

Hiyori had brought bag a sack full of candy. Given that she was in fifth grade now, she was no longer of an age where she might go overboard with eating and drinking, but she still needed to be a bit careful.

"It's all right! I'll be sure to brush my teeth. Oh, and the pumpkin pie that Yuki-chan's mom made was really tasty! She said she made it from the inside of the jack-o-lantern!"

"Well that *is* something. Her mom's pretty talented, after all. And speaking of pumpkins...we're having that for dinner."

At Kirishima's comment, she turned her eyes to Yokozawa. "Really?? What're you making, Oniichan?"

"Hey, why didn't you ask *me*?"

"Because there's no way *you* made it, Dad."

"I'll have you know we made it *together* today."

Yokozawa cast the boastful Kirishima a wry grin; 'together' though he might claim, he hadn't really helped much at all. Yokozawa

had only let him near the items that he could be sure Kirishima wouldn't screw up.

"I only let him cut up the pumpkin. We're having pumpkin au gratin."

"Woohoo! I love gratin!"

The cookbook he'd received from Hatori was indeed proving useful. He'd always been the type to get the hang of things once he got started, but lately he'd found himself trying out more and more new recipes in the hopes of seeing Hiyori's smiling face.

It was hard to mess up cooking if you just followed the recipe carefully, and perhaps because he could see the results clearly, it left him with a profound sense of accomplishment.

"Oh right! I brought back some souvenirs!"

"Souvenirs?" Perhaps something else had been passed out besides just candy at the party. Hiyori dug around inside a paper bag before tugging out the items she'd been looking for. "Here you go! Kitty-ear headbands! They had some left over from the ones they made for kids without costumes, so they let me have the extras!" She held out two headbands fit with triangle-shaped ears like a cat's.

"So these are handmade? Not bad." Kirishima looked over the headband in his hands carefully, offering praise. It seemed they'd attached triangular ears with fake fur to a simple over-the-counter headband.

"Aren't they adorable? They had a few different types, so I grabbed the black ones to match with Sora-chan!"

"Now that you mention it, they *do* match." Sorata's ears perked up at his name, and he glanced over.

"C'mon, Dad! Try them on!"

"Me? I dunno, I tend to look *really* good in this kind of thing, so that might not be such a good idea..." He took the proffered headband from Hiyori and settled it on his head, complaining about the tight fit as he did so.

"Wow, you're right! It looks really good on you!"

"Didn't I tell ya?" The headband portion was hidden well by his hair, so it made him look like he had cat ears. He looked every bit the

part of a fickle feline with a devilish smile, and Yokozawa had to admit he hadn't been lying; he did indeed look good.

"You should do it with me next year! I bet you'd look great as a vampire or somethin'!"

"Hmm, it might be nice to coordinate our costumes too, though. How about Yokozawa as a Wolfman, then? Or maybe all three of us as vampires? That'd be pretty cool."

"Ooh I like that! We'd all look awesome!!"

The pair seemed utterly engrossed in their conversation about the coming year's festivities, their heads filled with unimaginable fantasies.

"We'll have to look and see if there's any kind of event we can take part in."

"I'll pass." Just watching them was fine, but he didn't want to get drawn into having to don a costume of his own. But as he offered up a preemptive withdrawal, Hiyori returned a disappointed whine.

"Aww, why?"

"Why? Because I'm not suited for that kind of thing, of course."

"That's not true at all! You're super cool, Oniichan! You'd probably look good in *anything*!"

"No, I mean, just..." He appreciated the compliment, but that wasn't the issue here. He couldn't imagine any sort of costume that might actually look good on him.

"Here, try this on for now."

"I said I'm *fine*—"

"C'mon, play along. Get into the Halloween spirit!"

"Yeah, c'mon, Oniichan! It's just for a little bit, pleeeeeease?" He was weak to Hiyori's requests, and while he could chalk Kirishima's comments up to simple teasing, when faced with such an innocent gaze, he found he couldn't refuse. Relinquishing the battle to those hope-filled eyes, he reluctantly gave in.

"...*Only* for a little bit."

"Kay!!"

"And *don't laugh*."

"We'll be fine, honest!"

"And don't you *DARE* take any pictures!"

"Yeah yeah okay, I *got it*. Now put the damn thing on."

“.....” He grudgingly placed the headband he received from Kirishima on his head, wincing as it pinched because it was far too small, something he should have expected given Kirishima’s earlier complaints.

“Hmm...”

“...The hell’s with *that* reaction?”

Not only Kirishima bit Hiyori as well had their faces screwed up in confusion. “No, just...it strangely doesn’t look good on you at all... I was *sure* it’d look way cuter on you, too...”

“Shut up! This is why I didn’t want to wear it!” It pissed him off royally that Kirishima had the gall to say something like that after practically forcing him to wear the thing in the first place. It was outrageous!

“It’s okay, Oniichan! You look cute!”

“...You really don’t have to force yourself to try and cheer me up, Hiyo.” He felt pathetic having Hiyori feel like she needed to say something here, and with a sigh, he tugged off the headband—only to have Kirishima pipe up in a voice that said he’d just had a *great* idea.

“Hey, since everyone calls you the Wild Bear, maybe you’d look better with bear ears, then? That settles it—we’ll have to find some by next year!”

“I said *I don’t need any!*”

“Or maybe a vampire *would* be better?”

“Good point; something more formal like that’s probably gonna suit him more.”

And despite releasing yet another sigh at the father-daughter pair who’d once again slipped into serious conversation, he couldn’t help but be just the *tiniest* bit happy...that they were discussing his still being around *next year*.

THE END

See also...

Be sure to check out the Volumes [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), and [4](#)!